

CAPTAIN
W.E.
JOHNS

Biggles
FOLLOWS ON

Biggles

FOLLOWS ON

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS



Hodder &
Stoughton

Biggles

FOLLOWS ON

CAPTAIN W.E. JOHNS



CHAPTER I Ginger Brings News

Air Constable 'Ginger' Hebblethwaite burst into Air Police Headquarters at Scotland Yard with an urgency that suggested he had important news to impart. 'Hold on to your seats,' he said tersely. 'You're going to take a bump.'

Biggles — and Algy and Bertie, who were with him — looked up from their several tasks. 'We're all set,' announced Biggles. 'Let it go.'

'Who do you think I've just seen?' demanded Ginger, looking from one to the other.

'You're wasting time,' Biggles told him. 'This isn't a quiz contest.'

'Erich von Stalhein.'

Lines of surprise creased Biggles' forehead. 'Are you sure?' 'Certain.'

'Where did this happen?'

'Outside Victoria Station. I was coming away from Airways House and saw him turn into the Grosvenor Hotel. I went after him and was just in time to see him step into the lift.'

After that I couldn't follow without him seeing me — not that there would have been much point in it, anyway. He must be staying at the hotel.'

Biggles still looked dubious. 'You're positive of this?'

'Absolutely. He was complete with eyeglass and that long cigarette-holder he always uses.'

'What time was this?'

'About twenty minutes ago — say, just after six o'clock.'

'How was he looking? I mean, as regards appearance? Did he look prosperous or otherwise?'

'I imagine he'd have to be fairly prosperous to stay at the Grosvenor.

But somehow he looked older, a bit careworn, as if he'd been under the weather.'

'He'd probably think the same of me if he saw me,' observed Biggles, reaching for a cigarette. 'I wonder what he's doing in London. Only business of some sort could have brought him. He must be pretty hard pushed for money, or he wouldn't have come to a country which we know he detests, particularly as there was always a chance of his bumping into us. He's never got over the fact that through us Germany lost the first war.'

'If he's here on business, you can bet it's something shady,' put in Algy.

'There are people who would apply that word to some of the jobs we've had to do,'

reminded Biggles.

'How about spying? Wouldn't you call that shady?'

Biggles blew a smoke ring. 'If it is, our own careers wouldn't stand close investigation. I would only call the business shady when it's applied to a man working against his own country. Let's be fair about that. There was a time when a spy was regarded as something lower than a rat, even by the military brass-hats who profited by the information the spies brought in. But not now. Today, espionage is a recognised profession, and a dangerous one at that. Spies are a military necessity.

Every country employs hundreds, most of them hopelessly underpaid for the risks they take and the results they achieve.

Napoleon reckoned that one spy in the right place was worth twenty thousand men in the field – and he wasn't far wrong. The truth is, an effective spy is hated simply because he is feared. But why this talk of spies anyhow?'

'Association of ideas, old boy,' murmured Bertie. 'Spying and von Stalhein are one and the same thing.'

Biggles frowned. 'All right. So what? Don't forget that when I first collided with von Stalhein I was a spy in his country, although that was not from choice. I acted under orders. But I was still a spy, although I would have called myself a soldier. So was von Stalhein a soldier in the first place. Because he was efficient, he was seconded to the Wilhelmstrasse for top counter-espionage work. He suspected me from the start. Had he been given a free hand I wouldn't be here now. As I said a moment ago, what has happened to him since was largely the result of Germany losing the war. The shock of that knocked him off the rails, and he's never got on them again. He's been fighting a sort of one-man war against this country ever since.'

Tor heaven's sake!' cried Algy indignantly. 'Are you making excuses for him?'

Biggles shrugged. 'Up to a point. Who can say what we would have become had we lost the war?'

'We wouldn't have done some of the things von Stalhein has done,' declared Ginger emphatically. 'He hates the sight of you, and you know it.'

'He has no reason to regard me with affection.'

'He'd bump you off tomorrow if he had the chance.' Biggles smiled faintly. 'Okay – okay!'

The bumping off may come yet. I'm not really making excuses for the

man, but one must be fair. Von Stalhein came from an old Prussian military family. When Germany lost the war, he lost everything – home, estate, career—'

'And his self-respect,' interposed Algy.

'What was he to do? Can you see a man with his background taking a job in an office?'

'Some people have had to do that, old boy,' put in Bertie.

Biggles stubbed his cigarette. 'Have it your own way. The real tragedy for von Stalhein was, he survived the war.'

'He must have regretted a thousand times that he didn't stand you up in front of a firing-party when he had the chance,' said Ginger.

'It's time you knew that regret doesn't get you anywhere,' returned Biggles. 'Neither does this sort of argument. Let's stick to the present.'

Von Stalhein is in England. Knowing who and what he is, we are bound to regard him with suspicion. He ought to be watched.

Strictly speaking, that isn't our affair. It's a job for the counter-espionage people at M.I.5.'

'Why not arrest him before he can get into mischief?' suggested Algy.

'On what charge?'

'He's been breaking the law for years, and we know it.'

'Yes, we know it. But how are we going to prove it? What are we going to use for evidence? In this country judges are not interested in what people think.'

There was a silence that lasted for several seconds.

'No, it isn't as simple as that,' went on Biggles. 'Von Stalhein is no fool. He's played in some queer games, with some queer people, as we know only too well; but we should have a job to pin any specific crime on him.'

'What are you going to do about him, then?' inquired Ginger. 'Hand him over to M.I.5?'

'Our proper course would be to tip them off that he's here,' answered Biggles. 'But I must confess to some curiosity about the man. For instance, I'd like to see his passport, to find out how he got into the country.' Biggles tapped another cigarette thoughtfully. 'At this juncture I feel inclined to compromise. I mean, I'll try to get a line on what he's doing before I put the matter on official record.'

'Even before you tell the Air Commodore?' queried Algy.

'Yes. Once the Air Commodore knows about this he could act only through official channels, and that would cramp our actions.'

'Why not let one of us go down and keep an eye on him?' suggested Ginger.

Biggles shook his head. 'No use. He knows us all by sight. One glimpse of us and he'd be gone. Besides, that sort of job isn't really up our street. I'll have a word with Inspector Gaskin, of C Department. He has fellows who are experts at shadowing. Being unknown to von Stalhein it wouldn't matter if he saw them.'

Biggles reached for the intercom telephone and called the department to which he had referred. Presently he was speaking to the head of it. 'Can you spare me five minutes?' he inquired. 'Thanks, Inspector.' He replaced the receiver. 'He's coming up,' he told the others.

Presently the powerfully-built detective came in. 'What's worrying you?'

he asked Biggles, as he took a seat and began filling his pipe.

Biggles explained the position. He described von Stalhein and ran briefly over his record.

'What do you want me to do?' asked the inspector, thumbing the tobacco into his pipe.

'I want to find out what von Stalhein is doing in England,' answered Biggles. 'He knows us all by sight, so we daren't go near him. For a start, I'd like to know how long he's been here, and how long he intends to stay. It would also be interesting to know how he got into the country

— whether he flew in or came in by surface transport. He may not be using his own name. The reception people

at the hotel must have seen his passport. We might wonder how he managed to get one, and from what country. You might find out where he's spending his time, if he's alone or with friends — and all that sort of thing. In short, any information about him would be useful. I've helped you once or twice. This is where you can return the compliment.'

'Shouldn't be any difficulty about that,' stated the inspector. 'Give me twenty-four hours.

That should be long enough. I'll come round about this time tomorrow and tell you what I know.'

'Thanks a lot, Inspector,' replied Biggles. 'We'll be here.'

The detective got up. 'If that's all, I'll get back. I've plenty on my plate to keep me busy.

Be seeing you.' He went out.

'That's capital,' asserted Biggles. 'All we have to do is sit back and wait

for tomorrow.'

The inspector was as good as his word. Shortly after six o'clock when he walked into the Air Police office, notebook in hand, everyone was waiting, curious to hear the news.

'I've had a look at your man,' announced the inspector casually, turning over some pages of his notebook and putting it on the table where he could refer to it easily. Did you say he's a German?'

Biggles answered: 'He was.'

'Well, he isn't now.'

'I can't say that surprises me.'

'No, but I'll bet you'll be surprised when I tell you what he is.' 'A Pole?'

'No.'

'Austrian?'

'No.'

'Russian?'

'No.'

'Give it up.'

'He's either an American citizen, born in New York, or a Czech, born in Prague.'

Biggles' eyes opened wide. 'There's a lot of difference. How did you

work it out?'

'He's got two passports, so that he can be an American or a Czech, as it suits him. At the moment he's an American.'

'What name is he using?'

'Stalek, in each case. Jan Stalek. In America he would, no doubt, say he was of Dutch descent.'

'From what you tell me, I assume you've been in his room.' 'I had a look round.'

'How long has he been here?'

'Four months.'

'Four months!' Biggles looked amazed. 'By thunder! I wouldn't have guessed that, either.'

'Has he been in London all the time?'

'No. He made a trip to Paris. He first came to London from New York, via Southampton.'

'A month ago he went to Paris by boat and train. He came back the same way after three days.'

'What's he doing?'

'According to his papers he's a salesman for an American firm of general merchants.'

'If he's been here for four months he must have some money.' 'He came armed with plenty of dollars. Useful things nowadays — dollars. They'll take you almost anywhere.'

'What on earth could he have been doing for four months?'

'I can't tell you that; but I can tell you what he did yesterday.' 'Go ahead.'

'He had breakfast in his room at nine o'clock. That's usual, I understand. He has a suite, by the way, on the third floor — rooms number twenty-five to twenty-seven. He then sent for the morning papers and read until eleven o'clock. Then he went down to the station and caught a train to Caterham, where he went to a café named the "Stand Easy", and had an early lunch of bacon and eggs. My man followed him in, of course. From the easy way he spoke to the proprietor, he's been there before. He also nodded to some troops who came in, as if he knew them.'

'Troops from the Guards' Depot, I suppose?'

'Quite right. After a bit one of them went to his table and the two of them talked for about twenty minutes, Stalek buying the soldier a cup of coffee.'

'Did you find out the name of this soldier?' inquired Biggles.

'Of course. Ross. Guardsman Ian Ross. He's a London-born Scot. Age eighteen. Four months military service. Afterwards Stalek went for a walk, spoke to no one, returned to the same café for tea, chatted for a while with the proprietor, and then went back to the Grosvenor. He didn't go out again. Had his dinner in the hotel restaurant, then back to his room.' The inspector closed his notebook. 'That's the lot, so far. Do you want me to carry on?'

Biggles thought for a moment. 'Yes, if you will,' he decided. 'That needn't prevent me from making a few inquiries on my own account, now that I have something to work on.'

'Okay,' agreed the inspector, getting up. 'I'll pass on anything that comes in.'

'Thanks very much, Gaskin.'

After the detective had closed the door behind him, Biggles turned wondering eyes on the others.

'I guessed it,' said Algy in a hard voice. 'He's still playing spy.' 'He wouldn't learn much from a lad with four months service.' 'Every guardsman at the depot would hear the barrack-room gossip,' said Ginger.

'True enough,' admitted Biggles. 'This, obviously, is where we make a few inquiries about Ross.'

'How are you going to do that, old boy?' inquired Bertie.

'By going the quickest and easiest way about it,' answered Biggles.

'You mean, you'll have a word with Ross?'

'Not on your life. At least, not at this stage. He'd only have to say one word in the café about inquiries being made and von Stalhein would vanish. Erich is an old hand at the game. No. I'll go down to Caterham in the morning and have a word in confidence with the adjutant. If he turns out to be a co-operative type, I shall at least be able to get a slant on this lad Ross without alarming anybody.'

'Have you any ideas?' questioned Ginger.

'None,' answered Biggles. 'One thing that sticks out from Gaskin's report is this. Von Stalhein has some powerful friends. Presumably he's working for them. How else could he get passports from countries other than his own; and, moreover, under an assumed name?'

'They're fakes.'

'Of course they are. I mean, the people who issued those passports must have known the real identity of the man who wanted them.'

'I smell dirty work at the cross-roads,' murmured Bertie. 'Naturally, if von Stalhein is in the picture,' declared Algy cynically.

'Why not collect von Stalhein before he can do any further mischief?'

recommended Ginger. 'You were talking just now about a charge. Well, you've got one — entering the country with false papers. We could soon prove that.'

Biggles looked pained. 'I shall never make a good security policeman of you,' he said sadly. 'In modern practice, having located your spy, you leave him alone until you have checked up on what he is doing and how he is doing it. Sooner or later, thinking he is safe, he may betray other spies, and reveal his line of communication with his headquarters. To arrest Von Stalhein now would do more harm than good, because as soon as the people for whom he is working heard about it they would put somebody else on the job; a man unknown to us. We should then be much worse off than we are now.'

We do at least know our man; and, that being so, it shouldn't take us long to find out to what particular work he has been assigned.'

'But would the people he is working for know that he had been arrested?'

Ginger asked the question.

'Of course. The very fact that von Stalhein ceased to communicate with them would tell them that something had gone wrong.'

'Are you going to ring up the adjutant at Caterham and make an appointment?' asked Algy.

'No.'

'Why not?'

'Because the Orderly Room telephone will go through a switchboard, and where there is a switchboard the operator can hear. One word about someone coming down from Scotland Yard, and it would be all over the camp in five minutes. If that were to happen, I might as well stay at home.'

'I'll take a chance on catching the adjutant at his desk in the morning.'

'Let's go and get something to eat.'

CHAPTER II

Guardsman Ross

The following morning, at half-past ten, Biggles was escorted by a reluctant but efficient orderly-room sergeant into the presence of Captain Kingham, acting adjutant at the Guards' Depot.

The officer was busy at his desk. 'I understand you want to speak to me?'

he said briskly.

'Please be brief. I have a lot to do this morning.'

'I wanted to speak to you — alone,' said Biggles quietly. 'You can speak freely in front of my staff.'

'I don't doubt it, but I'd rather not. What I have to say involves a question of State security,' returned Biggles evenly.

The officer looked hard at Biggles' face and hesitated. Then, turning to the N.C.O., he inclined his head towards the door. 'I hope you're not wasting my time,' he remarked curtly as the door closed behind the sergeant.

'I hope I'm not wasting my own,' replied Biggles, putting his credentials on the desk.

One glance at them and the officer's manner changed. 'Why didn't you say who you were?' he complained.

'I didn't want anyone but you to know.'

'Not even my confidential sergeant?'

Biggles smiled. 'Not even your regimental sergeant-major. If your sergeant professes curiosity about my visit you can tell him anything but the truth.'

The adjutant offered his cigarette-case. 'Sit down. What's the trouble?'

Biggles accepted a cigarette. 'You have a recruit on the station named Ross — Ian Ross.'

'Quite right. What's he been up to?'

'That's what I'm here to find out. So far, I can only tell you that he is spending a certain amount of his off time in the company of one of the most efficient foreign agents in Europe.'

The adjutant's eyes sauced. 'Good Lord!' he ejaculated. 'You were not to know that, of course.'

'I certainly didn't know it.'

'It's unlikely that Ross knows it either, so let us not jump to conclusions.'

'What's Ross doing with this fellow?'

'That's what I want to find out. Is Ross engaged on work of a secret nature?'

'No.'

'What is he doing?'

The usual infantry routine.'

'Could he gain access to anything secret, even through another soldier

on the station?'

'No. Frankly, I don't think we have anything here that any member of the public shouldn'

t know about.'

'You can't think of any reason at all why a top-grade spy should seek the company of a private soldier here?'

'No.'

'What sort of a recruit is Ross?'

'He promises to turn out well. His reports are good. He is keen and intelligent and will, I believe, become an efficient soldier.'

Was he called up or did he enlist voluntarily?'

'He enlisted as soon as he was of age, and being of the necessary physical standard put his name down for the Guards.'

'What was he doing before he joined up?'

'I'd better get his papers.' The adjutant rang for the sergeant and called for the appropriate docket.

It was brought. The sergeant went out. Biggles looked through the documents. 'Nothing remotely suspicious here,' he remarked. 'Both parents British born. References from people who have known him all his life.

Served an apprenticeship as a motor mechanic.

His father was a Grenadier, I see. That should be good enough.'

Biggles closed the docket and put it back on the desk.

'What do we do next?' asked the adjutant anxiously. 'I don't like the idea of this boy keeping the sort of company you describe. It will end in trouble for him.'

'It certainly will if the association is continued.'

'Should we warn him?'

'That would mean warning the spy, too — unless ...'

'Unless what?'

'Unless we took Ross entirely into our confidence.'

'Is there any reason why we shouldn't?'

'From my point of view it would be taking a risk. If he's innocent there's every reason why he should be warned, even though that might put him in a position of some danger.'

On the other hand, if he knows what he's doing, we should have shown our hand to no purpose. What I really want to know is the drift of the conversation between Ross and this enemy agent. Only one man can tell us that, and that is Ross himself. I feel inclined to take a chance. Ross can't have known this man for very long, and it takes a fair while to persuade a fellow of Ross's type to betray his country. Could we have him in?'

'It isn't quite regular.'

'There's nothing to prevent me from questioning Ross, in my official capacity, outside the barracks. It might be better for all concerned if it were done here.'

'I should have to consult the commanding officer about that,' said the adjutant dubiously.

'Do so, by all means.'

It so happened that the Colonel commanding the Depot chose that moment to walk in. He had a good look at Biggles, who was, of course, in plain clothes, and then at the officer at the desk. 'What's the trouble?' he inquired shrewdly. 'Who's been doing what?'

Biggles smoked his cigarette while the adjutant revealed his authority and explained the purpose of his visit.

The Colonel frowned. 'I wonder, could this have any connection with the trouble we've been having?' he said, at the end.

'I should hardly think so, sir,' answered the adjutant.

Neither said what the trouble was, and Biggles did not ask.

'There's only one thing to do in a case like this, and that's to have Ross on the mat and tell him we know what he's been up to,' declared the Colonel bluntly.

Biggles looked slightly alarmed. 'But that's just it, sir; we don't know what he's been up to. If you take too strong a line at this juncture, we may never know. Let's have Ross in, by all means; but it would be better, until we know more, to give him the benefit of the doubt.'

'I could confine Ross to barracks,' asserted the Colonel. 'That would put an end to the business.'

'I repeat, sir, I think it would be better if we ascertained what the business is before we talk of putting an end to it,' said Biggles blandly. 'Ross, I grant, is within your jurisdiction, but not the man outside; and it is with him that I am chiefly concerned.'

'We'll have Ross in,' decided the Colonel.

'May I suggest that, as I know the details of the case, you allow me to ask the questions

— in the first instance, anyhow?'

'As you wish,' agreed the Colonel stiffly. He turned to the adjutant:

'Where is Ross now?'

'He should be on the square, sir.'

'Send for him.'

'Yes, sir.' The adjutant pressed his bell and passed the order to the sergeant.

Five minutes later the man concerned was marched in. 'You needn't wait,'

the Colonel told his escort.

The young Guardsman, a tall, fair, good-looking lad, who looked even younger than his years, stood rigid. His face was slightly pale. 'Stand at ease,' rapped out the Colonel.

The soldier complied. His blue eyes stared straight ahead.

'Now, Ross, I have here an officer from Scotland Yard. He wants to ask you a few questions,' said the Colonel sternly. 'The matter is serious and you would be well advised to speak the truth and the whole truth.' He made a sign for Biggles to begin.

The soldier did not move, except to moisten his lips nervously. Biggles'

eyes were on his face. 'Would you mind looking at me while I am talking to you?' he requested.

The eyes switched. Biggles caught them with his own and held them. 'Thank you,' he said softly, and continued. 'You are in the habit of visiting a café in this town called the "

Stand Easy." Is that correct?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You have met there a civilian who speaks with a slight foreign accent.

He wears a monocle and smokes his cigarettes in a long holder. He stood you a cup of coffee yesterday. You know the man I mean?'

'Yes, sir.'



'Stand at ease,' rapped out the Colonel.

520

'Do you know anything about him?'

Not much, sir.'

'A little?'

'Yes, sir. Only what he told me.'

'Did he tell you his nationality?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What did he say it was?'

'He told me he was a Czech, sir. Said he fought in the war.'

'He didn't tell you which side he fought on, I imagine?' said Biggles dryly.

'No, sir.'

'Yesterday was not the first time you have spoken, I fancy?' 'No, sir.'

'How many times have you spoken to him? Or put it the other way. How many times has he got into conversation with you?' 'Yesterday was the third time, sir.'

'What did you talk about?'

A pink stain crept into the soldier's cheeks. 'We talked about the army, sir.'

'I see. You talked about the army?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What had this man to say about the army?'

'He said soldiering was a fine life, sir.'

'And you agreed?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What was this man's interest in the army? Did he tell you that?'

The pulses between the soldier's ears and eyes could be seen beating. The tip of his nose was chalk white. These signs were not lost on Biggles.

'Remember what the Colonel told you at the beginning,'

he said quietly. 'You would be foolish, Ross, to try to hide anything.

The truth will come out, if not from you.'

The man told me he was recruiting for another army, sir. A better one than ours, he said.

The pay was twice as much as we get here, with plenty of leave, and sport, and so on. He said the regiment was a sort of International Brigade, like the French Foreign Legion.'

Biggles drew a deep breath. 'I see,' he said softly. 'Did this man happen to mention where this unit was based?'

'He said it was in Czechoslovakia, sir.'

'Did you believe this fairy tale?'

'No, sir. Well, not altogether, sir.'

'But you were interested?'

'Well, I – er—' The man faltered.

'You were interested, even knowing that this man was deliberately trying to induce you to join a foreign army, which would have meant breaking your Oath of Allegiance?'

'There was a guarantee we should never have to fight against British —'

'We? Who do you mean by we?'

'Me and the others.'

What others?'

'Those who have already gone, sir. That was the only reason why I was interested, sir.

That's God's truth, sir. You see, sir, my chum, Hugh Macdonald, he went.'

Àh,' breathed Biggles. 'Did this man know Macdonald was a friend of yours?'

'Yes, sir. He used to see us together in the "Stand Easy." It was because Macdonald went, I think, that he picked on me. He said he had a message for me from Macdonald to say he was having the time of his life, and if I had any sense I'd go over right away. I told him I didn't believe it.

Then he said he would tell Hugh to write to me. He must have done that because, soon afterwards, I had a letter from Hugh.'

Biggles looked surprised. 'You had a letter from him?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Where is it?'

'I've got it here, sir.' The soldier took out his wallet and selected a letter from several. He passed it to Biggles.

Biggles examined the stamp and the postmark before taking out the contents. He glanced at the letter, replaced it in the envelope, and handed it back to the Guardsman. 'If ever I saw a piece of forgery, that's it,' he said. He went on. 'Did you seriously consider joining Macdonald?'

'No, sir. If my father heard I'd been posted as a deserter he'd kill me stone dead.'

'Then why did you continue to associate with a man whom you knew to be an enemy of your country?'

The soldier was now perspiring, and it was clear that he was on the point of breaking down. 'Take your time,' Biggles told him.

'I was hoping to find out where Macdonald had gone, to persuade him to come home.'

Biggles sat back. 'You knew Macdonald pretty well? Why did he decide to accept this man's invitation?'

'Well, sir, he was a bit fed up. He'd got an idea in his head that the sergeant-major had got it in for him, and he was afraid he'd never make a good soldier.'

'Did you know that Macdonald had actually decided to go?'

'No, but I was afraid of it, sir. He went sort of quiet. I told him not to be a fool.'

'He didn't by any chance tell you, before he left, how he was going to get out of the country — or where he was going?'

'No, sir. He went on week-end leave. When he didn't come back I

guessed he'd gone. Afterwards the man at the café told me so. He offered me twenty pounds to go, too, but I didn't take it. He said it was just pocket-money, and there was plenty more where that came from.'

'What else did he tell you?'

'He said he would make all arrangements. There wouldn't be any difficulty. I'd be hundreds of miles away before I was missed.' 'What did you say to that?'

'I said I'd think it over, sir.' The soldier added, hastily: 'But that was only to keep in touch with the man so I could find out about Macdonald.'

'Didn't it occur to you that your proper course would be to report a matter as serious as this to your Commanding Officer?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Why didn't you?'

'I didn't want to make it too black for Macdonald. I know his parents.

They'd never get over it. I was frightened about the whole thing, and that's a fact, sir. I couldn't sleep at nights for worrying about it.'

'You seem to think a lot of your friend Macdonald?'

'We played at soldiers when we were kids together, sir. I did my level best to persuade him not to go; but he said he'd joined up to fight, not be ticked off all the time by a sergeant-major, who was always on to him about something or other.'

'Have any other men been caught in this trap?' asked Biggles.

'I can answer that,' broke in the Colonel, speaking through his teeth.

'In the last three months we've had to post seven men absent without leave.'

Biggles looked startled. There was an uncomfortable silence. The Colonel glared at the Guardsman. The soldier stared at the wall with glassy eyes.

The adjutant made meaningless marks on his blotting-pad. Biggles considered them all in turn. When he spoke it was to the Colonel. '

Well, sir, at least a mystery has been solved for you. I'd like to speak to you alone, if I may, before you take action on the situation. I suggest that Ross waits outside. We may need him again.'

'Very well.'

Biggles spoke again to the soldier. Not a word of this to a soul. If you speak, I won't be responsible for your life. You're in deeper water than you know.'

'I understand, sir.'

The soldier was marched out.

As soon as the officers were alone Biggles drew a long breath. 'This is worse than I feared,' he told the Colonel, who seemed to be in some danger of having a fit.

'I'll have this infernal Czech arrested forthwith!' grated the Colonel.

'He isn't a Czech. He's a German, although the last time I heard of him he was hiding behind the Iron Curtain,' said Biggles quietly. 'I don't care who the devil he is,' raged the Colonel.

'By arresting him you will defeat your object — that is, if you have

any hope of getting your men back? By this time, no doubt, they are bitterly regretting their folly. The picture is now pretty clear. A foreign power, we can guess which one, is apparently forming a unit composed of troops of other nationalities. That isn't a new idea. Hitler did it. Such men would be useful in many ways in the event of hostilities. A force of that sort could instruct others in the drill, tactics and equipment, of every other country in Western Europe. They would also be helpful as interpreters, and so on. We've got to get these men back, if only to save them from the consequences of their folly.'

'How can you get them back? Czechoslovakia is a big place.'

'These men aren't necessarily in Czechoslovakia, although I admit the evidence points that way. This agent has a Czech passport, and the letter Ross received came from Prague, although no address was given.'

'Then how the deuce can you hope to find these fellows?'

'I can think of only one way,' answered Biggles gravely. 'Ross will have to help us.'

'Ross?' The Colonel stared. 'He doesn't know where they are.' 'He will, if he accepts the proposition that has been put up to him.'

The Colonel blinked. 'Great heavens, man! Are you suggesting that Ross goes off like the others?'

'It may come to that if all else fails.'

'It would be sending the man to certain death!'

'Possibly. But what is one life against seven — that we know of? There may be other poor fools there, from other units. Naturally, before Ross takes another step he would have to be warned of his danger. In any case the decision would rest with him. I think he'

d do anything to save his chum, Macdonald, although I imagine the official view will not concern itself with individuals, who are deserters, anyway. Military Intelligence will be more anxious to know for what purpose these fellows are being used.'

'You think Ross might write and tell us where they all are, when he joins them?'

Biggles shook his head. 'I hardly think he'd be allowed to do that, sir.

The letter that Macdonald was alleged to have written was either a forgery or else it was produced under pressure. If Ross went I should follow him. But it hasn't come to that yet.'

'Sounds devilish dangerous to me.'

"Danger" is a word I didn't expect to hear used here.' The Colonel flushed.

'Let's take our fences as we come to them,' suggested Biggles. 'We may get the information we want without losing sight of Ross.' 'What do you propose?'

'I suggest that we put the matter fairly to Ross, pointing out which way his duty lies —

although I think he knows that already. For the moment he can go on meeting the man at the café, as if he is still unable to make up his mind. It would be something if he could learn how his comrades were got out of the country. After all, it would be reasonable for him to ask questions before deciding on a step as irrevocable as desertion. If Ross fails to get any further information by these methods, we'll have to consider the next step.'

'Could we trust Ross to play the game? It's a big responsibility for a fellow of his age and experience.'

'I can see no alternative. If I'm any judge of a man, Ross is as sound as a bell. He'll do his best. After all he has a personal interest, in his friend Macdonald.'

'All right. Let's have him in and hear how he feels about it. I can put him on indefinite leave.'

'One more question,' said Biggles. 'Have the next-of-kin of these deserters been questioned, to find out if anything is known of their whereabouts?'

'We sent a military escort to the home of every man concerned, that being the most likely place to find him. In each case the escort returned saying that the man was not there, and nothing had been heard of him.'

'No letters?'

'Not a word. And that's probably true, because in some cases the mothers of these fellows were very upset.'

'Which confirms that they are not allowed to write letters, or one of them at least would have got in touch with his home.'

Ross was brought back into the room.

Biggles took up the conversation. 'Now I want you to listen to me very carefully, Ross,'

he began. 'The matter we have been discussing is far more serious than you may have supposed. Because I think you can help us, and those of your comrades, who, believe me, have practically thrown their lives away, I am going to take you fully into my confidence. But before I do that I want your word that, having started, you won't go back on us.'

'I will—'

'Just a minute. What I am going to ask you to do is dangerous. One slip may cost you your life. The man you have met at the café is one of the most ruthless spies in Europe.

He's a Prussian. And there are even more dangerous men behind him. They would think no more of killing you, if they thought you were working for me, than they would of swotting a fly. Now, what do you say? Are you prepared to work under my instructions?

There's no compulsion about it. You are within your rights to say no, if you'd rather keep out.'

'I'll do anything you say, sir.'

'Even though the business may cost you your life before we are through with it?'

'If I'd been afraid of dying I wouldn't have joined the army.'

'That's the way to talk. Now we've got that clear, I'll go on. What we've got to do is this.

We've got to find out where this fancy regiment is stationed, and bring our fellows back.

They'll be glad enough to come, I'll warrant. For the moment, we'll learn all we can, here.

I want you to go on seeing this man, behaving as though you can't make up your mind. In his attempts to win you over he may let one or two things drop. It would be natural for you to want to know just where you are going, and how you're going to get there. Pretend to be nervous about travelling abroad, to find out if you would go alone or with an escort.

See what I mean?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Just go on talking — and listening. That's all I can tell you. You'll have to use your intelligence. I'll give you one tip. Don't on any account allow yourself to be persuaded to take strong drink. Alcohol loosens a man's tongue faster than anything — and you might say too much.

Understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I shall be about. Tell the adjutant when you have anything to report, and he'll send for me. That's enough for now. It may be only a beginning.

Eventually you may have to accept this man's offer, in order to reach Macdonald. If so, I shan't be far away from you.

But we'll talk about that when the time comes. Meanwhile, this spy must suspect nothing.

Let's leave it like that.' Biggles turned to the Colonel. 'That's all, sir.'

When the soldier had been dismissed Biggles stood up. 'There's nothing more we can do for the moment,' he said. 'The next move will depend on what Ross has to report. I shall be at Scotland Yard. Give me a ring and I'll come straight down.'

'You know, I can't help feeling that this matter is so serious that it ought to be reported to the Higher Authority,' said the Colonel.

'It's because it's so serious that I've refrained from doing that myself,' returned Biggles. '

You don't need me to tell you that if one person outside this room

learns what is going on, a hundred people will know, and the next thing the story will be in the newspapers.

That would relieve me of a lot of trouble because the matter would then pass out of my hands. It would also save the enemy all the trouble I am



He wasn't taking any chances.

(See p. 35)

going to cause him if I can handle the thing my way. Report the business to the War Office if you feel you must, sir, but, with all respect, I submit that if you do you can say goodbye to any chance of getting these spies buttoned up, or of bringing home the fools who thought they were going to a military paradise, but have

found themselves in the other place. All I ask is, if you decide to report the matter officially, tip me off in time to do the same.'

'If things go wrong I shall get a rap.'

'So will Ross — on the head. And so, probably, will I.'

The Colonel hesitated. 'I'll do nothing for the moment,' he decided.

'We'll give things a day or two to see how they go.'

'Very well, sir. A final piece of advice. Keep away from the "Stand Easy." I say that because you may be tempted to have a look at this man who has reduced your ranks. If he sees you staring at him, he'll guess why. He was trained in the right school, and he's been at this game all his life. Good day, gentlemen. I'm sorry to give you all this trouble.

The only consolation I can offer is, had I not stepped in it might have got worse.'

Biggles went out, got into his car, put on a pair of dark glasses and pulled the rim of his hat well down. He wasn't taking any chances of being seen in Caterham by Erich von Stalhein.

CHAPTER III

Biggles Makes His Plans

As he drove back to the Yard, Biggles decided that he had every reason to be satisfied with his visit to Caterham. To have discovered so quickly, and with so little trouble, what von Stalhein was doing in the country exceeded his most optimistic hopes. But, as he perceived, by solving this problem he had set himself some even more difficult ones. Not only difficult ones, but dangerous ones. He was more than a little perturbed by the gravity of what he had learned, and while he felt disinclined to carry the responsibility of dealing with the matter within his own department, he was equally reluctant, for security reasons, to report officially what he knew. Apart from the risk of careless talk, spies, he was well aware, were everywhere, even in the most surprising places. Von Stalhein would need only one whiff of suspicion that his activities were under surveillance, and the difficulties and dangers would be increased tenfold. Quite apart from that, with the world political situation already strained, the mishandling of the affair might do immense mischief.

Biggles wondered how many men had already been recruited from the Western Powers; for it seemed safe to suppose that if British troops were being taken, there would be others. The title International Brigade suggested troops of several countries. Again, was von Stalhein working alone in Britain, or were other agents at work at other military depots? As for the men who had been crazy enough to go, it was easy to imagine the conditions in which they now found themselves. That they would repent their action was certain. But what could they do about it? Even if a means of escape presented itself, they would hardly dare to take it, knowing that they would be arrested for desertion as soon as they landed in Britain. Once the enemy had them in his power he could force them to do anything. They would go from bad to worse until they were so hopelessly compromised that they would have to stay abroad for the rest of their lives, whether they liked it or not.

Biggles remembered that there had been more than one case of men of the Occupation Forces in Germany — British, American and French — being seized and carried by force behind the Iron Curtain. Apparently this method of getting recruits was not successful; hence the new trick.

Still pondering these matters, Biggles walked into the office to find the others waiting, and looking at him expectantly.

'What's the news?' asked Ginger.

'Grim,' answered Biggles, and, sitting down at his desk, narrated the result of his inquiries. Not until he had finished did anyone speak.

'Sounds as if von Stalhein has turned Communist,' remarked Algy.

'When he worked for Hitler in the war he was a Nazi,' reminded Ginger.

'I think he would make no bones about being anything that suited him,'

said Biggles. '

Primarily he was a soldier, and few soldiers have much time for politics.

Von Stalhein is really concerned only with two things — himself and Germany. He is interested to some extent in money, of course, because he has to have money to live in the style to which he has always been accustomed. He has reached the stage when he isn'

t particular how he gets it.'

'Are you going to tell the Chief about this?' asked Ginger.

'I shall have to,' replied Biggles. 'If things went wrong I should have no valid excuse for keeping the information to myself. I'm still turning the question over in my mind. I may wait to see what tomorrow brings forth.'

'Are you seriously thinking of letting Ross accept von Stalhein's offer?'

Algy asked.

'If all else fails, yes. We can't let the thing go on.'

'If you ever lose sight of Ross he'll have had it,' averred Algy. 'If the men who have already gone haven't been able to get in touch with home, he won't be able to. Once he is given a civilian hat, and a ticket to leave the country, von Stalhein won't take his eyes off him until he's on his way. What I mean is, he wouldn't be able to take any escape equipment with him. He wouldn't have an earthly chance of getting in touch with you, or anyone else. Von Stalhein would see to that.'

'We'll deal with such problems when they arise,' answered Biggles. 'We haven't come to them yet.'

The question was still being discussed at six o'clock when Inspector Gaskin came in.

'Any more news?' asked Biggles quickly.

'Nothing to speak of,' replied the detective, knocking out his pipe and putting it in his pocket. 'I went to the Grosvenor today while our friend was out and had a look over his suite. He went to Caterham again. I had a man trailing him.'

'Did you find anything?'

'Just a couple of things that puzzled me. Here's one of them.' The inspector opened his notebook and took out a loose page. 'There was a slip of paper in a drawer. It had some letters on it; looks like some sort of code. I made a copy. Take a look. Do these letters mean anything to you?'

A curious expression came over Biggles' face as he looked at the slip.

'They certainly do mean something to me,' he said in a hard voice. 'In fact, they mean quite a lot. These are the registration letters of all our aircraft.'

The Inspector whistled softly. 'Does that mean he knows you're on the job?'

'I don't think so,' answered Biggles slowly. 'I don't see how he could know. But he knows where my machines are kept. There's no secret about that. I should say he's made a note of our registration marks either for his own information, or to pass on to his friends in Europe, in case any of our machines were seen. He's very thorough, is von Stalhein.'

'The only other thing that seemed a bit odd was a box of ties — neckties,' went on the Inspector.

'What's queer about that? Most men wear a tie.'

'True. But most men buy one tie at a time, and unless it's a club or regimental tie, it's usually a different design from those they already have. I found a box with eleven ties in it. They were brand new, and all alike.'

Ginger interposed. 'Did these ties happen to be black with red spots?'

The Inspector looked surprised 'They did.'

Biggles cocked an eye at Ginger. 'How did you know?'

'Because when I saw him, von Stalhein was wearing one — possibly the one that would make up a dozen in the box. I noticed it particularly because I've never seen von Stalhein wear anything but a plain black tie.'

'We shall have to think about that,' said Biggles. 'Tell me, Inspector; what did our friend do at Caterham?'

'Same as before. He spoke to some soldiers and had a long talk with Ross.'

'His movements were the same as the last time we watched him.' The detective got up. '

That's the lot. I've still got a man on the job. I'll let you know any developments.' He went out.

Biggles sat staring at the others. 'Ginger, you might take a walk round the West End shops in the morning and see if you can find any black ties with red spots. If you do, buy one or two.'

Ginger's eyebrows went up. 'What for?'

'Just an idea,' murmured Biggles.

'I've got an idea, too,' put in Algy. 'Before a man can get out of this country and into another he needs a passport. All these recruits of von Stalhein must have had one. Ross would need one if he went. How does von Stalhein get British passports?'

'There wouldn't be much difficulty about that,' returned Biggles, 'These fellows could all travel on the same passport, if it comes to that. When it had served its purpose it could be sent back and used again. The photograph and the entries could be erased and fresh ones substituted.

There are plenty of spare British passports in Eastern Europe, anyway. In the Spanish Civil War, all the British contingent of the International Brigade had their passports taken from them. They didn't get them back.

We know where they went.'

The telephone rang. Biggles picked up the receiver. 'Good. I'll be with you in half an hour,' he said, and hung up. 'That was the adjutant at Caterham,' he told the others. 'He's got Ross with him. Stick around till I get back.'

He was away for the best part of two hours.

'Now what?' inquired Ginger when he returned.

'We've made a little progress — not much,' answered Biggles, dropping into his chair. '

Ross had a long talk with von Stalhein

today — we already knew that. I've just had a word with Ross. Under the pretence of being inclined to accept the offer, he's picked up a detail or two. When he is ready to go he is given a suit of civilian clothes, money, passport and an air ticket from London to a European airport.

There he will be met by a man who will tell him what to do next.

Saturday was suggested as the best time to go, because on that day Ross can get a week-end pass. That gives him plenty of time to get clear. Ross says he tried hard to get more information, but there was nothing doing.

Which means that we shan't get any further along that particular line of inquiry.'

'Did you fix up with Ross to accept?' asked Algy.

'Not yet. He said he was willing to go. I told him to do nothing more until he hears from me again.'

'What's the next move?'

'I've decided to tell Raymond about it. This thing is too big for us to carry on our own hook. The Air Commodore will probably have gone home, in which case I'll go to his house. There's no need for you to stay. I shall probably be late. You needn't wait up for me unless you want to. I'll get along.'

The Air Commodore was not in his office. Biggles went to his home, and caught him just as he was leaving for the club, where he usually

dined.

Aware that Biggles would not trouble him at such a late hour unless he had urgent news to impart, he asked him to join him. Biggles accepted, and over the meal, in a quiet corner of the dining-room, revealed the plot he had uncovered.

The Air Commodore's expression hardened as he listened to the story, but he said nothing until Biggles had finished. Even then it was a little while before he spoke. 'This is a pretty state of affairs,' he said bitterly. 'There was a time when our enemies were content to steal our secrets. Now they entice away our troops. What do you suggest doing about it?'

'I feel inclined to let Ross go, and follow him,' said Biggles. 'I can't see any other course.'

For their sakes, as well as our own, we can't just abandon these fellows who have already taken the bait. Anyhow, we must find out where they are.'

'If Ross goes, he'll take his life in his hands.'

'So shall we all. Ross knows the danger.'

'Don't, for goodness sake, do anything to start a war.'

Biggles frowned. 'Surely that's what the other side is doing now? They can't expect us to sit back and do nothing about it. I doubt if any country implicated would kick up a fuss if we were caught in their territory, because if the thing became public it would mean exposing their own hand as well as ours.'

'How can you follow Ross without being seen yourself? Von Stalhein will not lose sight of him, you may be sure, until he's actually on his way.'

'That will have to be arranged. I think it could be managed.' 'You

mean, as he will go by air, you'd follow in one of your machines?'

'Yes.'

'What if it comes to night flying? You'd lose your man in the dark. Or, for that matter, suppose Ross, when he's abroad, is switched suddenly to surface travel — a private car, for instance?'

'That'll be my worry,' said Biggles shortly. 'I can think of a score of unpleasant possibilities; but, as I said just now, what's the alternative?'

'We could pick up von Stalhein and so put an end to the business.'

'You might pick up von Stalhein, but how could you be sure that would end the business?'

The chances are that he would simply be replaced by someone else. It's better to deal with a devil we know than one we don't know. Besides, to grab von Stalhein would tell the enemy we know what's going on. That would definitely mean saying goodbye to these silly fools who have already been hooked.'

Still the Air Commodore hesitated. He looked worried. 'I don't like it, Bigglesworth. It sounds too much like attempting the impossible. You might get behind the Iron Curtain by dropping in from an aircraft; but I can't see you getting out again. Without knowing the country you couldn't arrange for a machine to pick you up. You couldn't even get a message home to say where you were. Once in, you would probably disappear as completely as a stone dropped in the middle of the Atlantic. Every hand would be against you. Think of the language difficulties. You wouldn't be able to move about, get food—'

'Just a minute, sir,' broke in Biggles. 'I've taken all these things into account. I won't deny it's risky; but someone has to take risks. The biggest difficulty of all will be keeping Ross in sight. If I lose him, he's had it. He'd never get out on his own — unless I could get in touch with him again.'

'How could you do that? Wander about Europe in the hope of meeting him?'

The Air Commodore was frankly sarcastic.

'No. There's only one way. We should have to decide on a rendezvous before the start. If I lost him, I should go there and wait. On the other hand, he could make for the same meeting place.'

'What meeting place?'

'That's where you'll have to help us.'

'What do you mean?'

'I imagine we have our own agents behind the Curtain. I also imagine that they have means of getting in touch with home, or they would serve no useful purpose.'

'And I also imagine that the Intelligence Service will think twice before they give us such an address,' said the Air Commodore grimly.

'It's asking a lot, I know. But I think the occasion warrants it. If they refuse — well, we shall have to manage on our own. But such an address would make all the difference to our chances.'

The Air Commodore rolled breadcrumbs into little balls. 'Another trouble is, there is so much territory behind the Iron Curtain. This International Unit might be anywhere between Poland and Bulgaria.'

'True enough. But I have a feeling that we shall find it in Czechoslovakia.'

'Why there?'

'All the evidence we have points to it. Ross had a letter from Prague — I saw the postmark. Von Stalhein has a Czech passport, which presumably he uses. When I go I shall, with your assistance, carry a Czech passport for the same reason. We have people who could provide that I suppose?'

The Air Commodore gave ground reluctantly. 'Even if you found these fellows, how could you get them out of the country?' he argued.

'We should have to fly them out. There could be no other way.' 'That would be a nice job to undertake.'

'We've tackled worse.'

The Air Commodore drew a deep breath. 'All right,' he said wearily. 'Have it your own way. Even if you don't bring these men back, it will be something if you can find out what they're doing. Tell me exactly what you think you'll require and I'll do my best to procure it.'

The discussion was continued until the small hours. When Biggles finally reached home he found the others still up, waiting for him.

'Well, what's the verdict?' asked Algy.

Biggles sank into a chair and reached for a cigarette. 'I'm going to ask Ross to go.'

'The Chief has agreed to that?'

'Yes. He wasn't happy about it. Neither am I, for that matter. He could see the difficulties of trying to keep Ross in sight.'

'So can I,' murmured Ginger.

'If we can get a line on the general direction, or on the country to which von Stalhein's recruits are being sent, it will be something to go on with,' asserted Biggles. 'Anyway, in the morning I shall tell Ross to

accept. From what has been said, he will probably start his journey on Saturday afternoon.'

'But how can you possibly keep an eye on him, old boy, without being spotted by that wily old fox, von Stalhein?' inquired Bertie, rubbing his eyeglass.

'I've been turning that over in my mind all day,' Biggles told him.

'Gaskin will have to help us for the first part of the business. I shall ask him to shadow von Stalhein from the time Ross says he's willing to go. The first thing von Stalhein will have to do is to book a passage. If he is watched, we should learn the time and place of Ross's departure. It seems certain he will go by air. I shall arrange for Ginger to be inside the machine, possibly in the radio cabin, until it is airborne. I'm assuming that von Stalhein won't travel with Ross. I shall be sitting on the tarmac in the Proctor when Ross's machine takes off. I shall follow it — or, rather, head for the same destination. You, Algy and Bertie, will stand by for radio signals from me, ready to act as I direct. That's only a rough outline of the general idea. We'll work out the details tomorrow. We mustn't forget to change our registration letters. Now let's see about getting some sleep.'

CHAPTER IV

By Air — to Where?

At a quarter to three on the following Saturday afternoon iggles sat in the cockpit of a police Proctor aircraft that had been put in a place convenient for the observation of passengers who had booked for the three o'clock British European Airways service to Paris.

The big machine was already drawn up to receive its freight, human and otherwise. Inside, by arrangement with the Traffic Manager, was Ginger, in a position from which he could not be seen from outside.

These arrangements were not guesswork. They were based on definite information, the result of a good deal of trouble on the part of more than one department at Scotland Yard.

So far, everything had gone smoothly. Indeed, as far as Biggles knew, they had gone without a hitch, and he was actually in possession of more information than he expected to get. This was brought about largely by the close and efficient co-operation of Inspector Gaskin and his highly-trained staff.

Guardsman Ross, who had thrown himself wholeheartedly into the undertaking regardless of its perilous nature, had told von Stalhein that he had decided to accept his invitation to join the International Corps; whereupon von Stalhein, watched by Gaskin's men, had lost no time in making the necessary arrangements.

These need not be dwelt upon in detail, but they exposed two more members of the spy organisation, one a photographer and the other a small printer, in the East End of London. They were left alone for the time being. What was of greater importance to Biggles was the booking by von Stalhein of a single passage to Paris, by British European Airways, on the three o'clock Saturday plane. The seat had been taken in the name of Ross. From the fact that von Stalhein had not troubled to change the name of his recruit, Biggles could only suppose that he felt he was on safe ground.

Nothing of importance had transpired at the final interview between Ross and the German. Ross told his adjutant, who passed the information on to Biggles, that they were to meet at the 'Stand Easy' café at a quarter-past one; and in due course this appointment was kept. From that moment Ross and von Stalhein were under surveillance.

They had gone together to von Stalhein's suite at the Grosvenor Hotel.

When they emerged, and went into the dining-room for a meal, Ross was apparently ready for the journey, for he was now dressed in a dark suit and soft hat, and carried a suitcase. An interesting detail was, he wore a red-spotted black tie. Biggles, who was waiting at the airport with Ginger, had received this information direct from Inspector Gaskin.

'What do you make of this spotted tie business?' Ginger had asked Biggles.

'I can only think that it's for purposes of identification,' replied Biggles. 'We'll put ours on. They can do us no harm even if they do no good.'

Ginger, following Biggles' instructions to procure the ties, had found them in a shop in Piccadilly. This was only one of several minor preparations that had been put in hand as soon as it had been decided that Ross should accept von Stalhein's invitation.

Documents, which included passports, were prepared. Sums of money, in several foreign currencies, were procured. Into the linings of jackets had been inserted 'escape'

equipment designed to aid prisoners of war – tiny steel files, miniature compasses, and maps which, folded, were no larger than a postage stamp.

In providing these Biggles was thinking not so much of himself as of Ross, and the men he hoped to release. As he remarked with a smile: 'It's often little things like this that count.'

At the last minute he had rung up Marcel Brissac, his opposite number

of the International Police Commission in Paris, and asked him to meet him off the plane at Le Bourget, the Paris airport which it seemed was to be the first stop. He had no particular reason for doing this. It struck him that it might be useful to have official assistance at the airport should there be trouble of any sort. 'There's a chance that there may be a man waiting for the London plane who wears a black tie with red spots,' he told Marcel. 'If so, check up on him and see if he books a passage for anywhere.' Marcel agreed to do this.

For luggage, Biggles and Ginger each carried only a small handbag containing nothing more questionable than small-kittoilet things, pyjamas, and a spare shirt and socks.

Air Commodore Raymond had done all that Biggles had required of him. This was not much, but it was of paramount importance. He had obtained a name and address in Prague, which those engaged in the case, including Ross, could use as a hide-out, and from where, in dire emergency, a message could be got home. This address had of course been committed to memory.

So the stage was set for what Biggles knew was likely to prove one of the most hazardous operations he had ever undertaken.

The motor-coach bringing the passengers from London now arrived, and very soon the travellers were making their way towards the aircraft. Biggles saw von Stalhein talking earnestly to Ross, presumably giving him final instructions. For a moment a smile softened Biggles' expression as he saw Inspector Gaskin in the background, also watching.

Ross took his place in the machine. Von Stalhein retired.

Biggles waited for no more, for there was no likelihood of any change of plan on either side. He asked Control for permission to take off, and having received it, he taxied out.

In a minute or two he was in the air, heading for Paris. By arriving first he would be able to watch the passenger plane come in, and have time to look over the people waiting for it. With von Stalhein out of

the way there would be no danger in this. He hoped also to have a chat with Marcel.

He found Marcel waiting, and having put the Proctor out of the way he lost no time in coming to the point. 'Any clients wearing spotted ties?'

he asked, as they shook hands.

Marcel grinned. 'But of course, mon ami. We wouldn't disappoint you. He is here.'

'Where?'

'In the booking hall. Come over and I will show him to you. I think he expects a friend on the London plane, for he has in his pocket two tickets for Prague.'

'Good work, Marcel,' acknowledged Biggles. 'At what time does the Prague machine leave?'

'At four-forty-five. Voila! There it stands, ready.'

'Go and get me two tickets, if it isn't booked to capacity. I'm going on that plane, too.'

Marcel looked pained. Not even one night in Paris?'

'I haven't time. This is serious, and urgent.'

Marcel's expressive eyes asked a question. 'What happens?' 'Have you had any men deserting from your army lately?'

Marcel shrugged. 'How would I know?'

'Find out — but not now. I'll tell you all about it when I come back

from Prague. Get me the tickets.'

'You want two tickets?'

'Yes. Ginger will go with me.'

As they walked into the main hall Marcel nudged Biggles. 'There is your man,' he said.

Following the direction indicated Biggles saw a nondescript individual with dark, restless eyes, a sallow complexion and a rather nervous manner. He was reading, or pretending to read, a newspaper; but his eyes, Biggles noted, did not linger on the printed page.

Marcel went off to get the tickets, leaving Biggles watching the man with the spotted tie.

Presently a curious thing happened; at least, it puzzled Biggles for a minute. The man he was watching looked directly at him, almost as if he had become aware that he was being scrutinised. Biggles saw him start slightly, before turning away, nearly dropping his paper in doing so. But again his eyes came back to Biggles. For a moment he fidgeted, obviously ill at ease. Then he appeared to reach a decision. After a glance to left and right he came near to where Biggles was standing, and said, in a low voice, speaking in German: 'All is well, I hope?'

Biggles was somewhat taken aback; but even as he automatically answered he realised what had happened. The man had noticed his spotted tie and had taken him for a member of the organisation for which he himself was working. This, up to a point, was the very purpose for which Biggles had adopted the tie; but he was hardly prepared for it to operate so soon, and so effectively. Too effectively, in fact; for it seemed to him at that moment that it was likely to be embarrassing. For this reason he would have avoided further conversation had it been possible, but as it was not he resolved to take advantage of the incident if this could be done without arousing the man's suspicions. It should not be difficult, he thought, for the fellow did not strike him as being a particularly bright type. Thinking quickly, he decided that to end the conversation too abruptly might

set the fellow wondering, and in the end do more harm than good.

Said the man: 'We travel together perhaps?'

'Perhaps,' answered Biggles. Outwardly his manner was casual; inwardly he had qualms, for he was afraid that remarks by the man might be passwords, to which he would be expected to return the correct answers.

However, the man went on. 'Are you under orders, or are you only returning home?'

'Orders,' replied Biggles. 'I go to Prague.' He felt safe in saying this, knowing that the man had tickets for that city. His presence in the same aircraft would now appear natural.

'So. I also go to Prague,' admitted the man.

'Like me, you are here to meet the London plane?' prompted Biggles.

'I have a fellow traveller on board.' 'And me.'

'One of the regulars, I suppose?'

'I'm no longer doing that work,' said Biggles casually. 'I have a more important man to meet. In Prague we shall meet at the usual hotel, no doubt?'

'I go to the Hotel Schweiz, in the Moldaustrasse.'

'That's right,' agreed Biggles. 'I may see you there.'

'You were lucky to get promotion,' said the man in a surly voice.

'I have been nothing but a Laufbursche (errand boy) for years. I was

told there was money in the business, but what I get is hardly enough to live on.' The man spoke bitterly.

'Don't worry,' Biggles told him consolingly. 'Your turn will come. Take my advice and be more careful what you say. If I reported what you said it would mean trouble for you.'

Fear leapt into the man's eyes. 'Yes, I shouldn't have said it. I try hard at my work, but sometimes I feel it is not noticed.'

'I'll put in a word for you,' promised Biggles.

Danke schon.'

'Do you go with your man to the end of his journey?' inquired Biggles.

'No. Only to Prague.'

'These men must wonder where they are going.'

The man smiled unpleasantly. 'Those do, certainly, who are given fur coats.'

'That's what I think,' returned Biggles, his face expressionless.

The appearance of the London plane put an end to the conversation. The man walked nearer to the barrier while Biggles remained where he was until Marcel returned with the tickets. He took them from him. 'Don't wait,' he said quietly. 'We may be watched, and you may be recognised. I will get in touch with you later. Au revoir.'

'Au revoir, mon ami.' Marcel turned away.

Biggles walked forward, and seeing Ginger, joined him. He moved quickly, for he realised that the German to whom he had been speaking, seeing two passengers wearing spotted ties, Ginger and

Ross, might be puzzled. When Biggles greeted Ginger the man went over to Ross, who was looking about him, and any doubts about identification were settled.

'Any news?' Biggles asked Ginger, as soon as landing formalities had been complied with.

'Nothing,' answered Ginger quietly. 'I had a word with Ross coming over.'

He still doesn't know where he's going. All he knew was, a man wearing a spotted tie would meet him here. That's the fellow he's talking to now I suppose.'

'Quite right. It was rather funny. We were both waiting here and the fellow noticed my tie. He spoke to me, but I didn't learn much.'

'Did you find out where he's taking Ross?'

'I already knew that. Marcel was here. He told me the fellow had two tickets for Prague.'

But that's only the next hop. Apparently Ross goes on from there with someone else.'

'Do we travel with them?'

'Of course. I have two tickets for Prague in my pocket. Marcel got them for me. I told the chap that I, too, was expecting a friend on the London plane, and was then going on to Prague. He won't be surprised, therefore, to see us on board. That's the machine over there — the Douglas with the Czech Airline markings.'

'You'll leave the Proctor here, then?'

'Can't do anything else. I shouldn't get far if I landed it at Prague.'

'The police would be on me like a ton of bricks.'

'You decided to take me with you?'

'Yes. This is where our troubles may begin. I may need help.' 'It'll be dark when we get there.'

'So much the better.'

'Where are we going to stay when we get there?'

'I shall try to get in at the Hotel Schweiz.'

'Why there?'

'Because that's where our friend over the way is taking Ross.' Ginger whistled softly. '

Good work. We shall still be able to keep an eye on him.'

'That's what I'm hoping. The big problem will be how to follow Ross when he's moved on again. I imagine he won't be long in Prague. But we can only deal with that when the time comes. Let's go over to the machine.

Here's your ticket. It'll be all right for us to sit together, but there can be no more talking to Ross.'

They moved on towards the aircraft bearing the O K registration letters of Czechoslovakia.

CHAPTER V

Behind the Curtain

It was dusk when the Douglas glided over the boundary lights of Ruzyn Airfield, the civil airport of the ancient Bohemian city of Prague.

There had been no developments on the journey. Indeed, Biggles and Ginger, who sat together, hardly spoke. The same might be said of Ross and his escort, who also sat together, although in that case conversation may have been handicapped by language difficulties. The remaining seats were occupied by ordinary-looking people, mostly men; but with so much political intrigue going on in Europe Biggles did not lose sight of the possibility that some of these were not so inoffensive as they appeared to be.



Again the Customs man was touched on the arm.

After landing, the usual formalities were observed. As far as Biggles was able to see there was nothing abnormal about this procedure; but knowing something of totalitarian methods he felt sure that hidden eyes were scrutinising the passengers closely.

Approaching the Customs barrier he deliberately allowed Ross and his escort to go first, in order to keep his eyes on them; and in doing this he observed the first sign of under-cover behaviour. It was not conspicuous. Indeed, had he not been watching closely it would have

passed unnoticed. Standing behind the uniformed Customs official was a dour-looking civilian. As Ross put his bag on the counter, his companion's hand went to his tie, as if to straighten it. It appeared to be a careless movement: but it brought response. The civilian took a pace forward and touched the uniformed man on the arm. Forthwith the official, without even a question, put his chalk mark on the bags carried by Ross and his escort, who then simply walked on through the barrier.

Biggles, followed by Ginger, was next in the queue. They put their luggage on the counter. Biggles' hand went to his tie. For a split second his eyes met the hard gaze of the civilian watcher. Again the Customs man was touched on the arm. On the two pieces of luggage went the chalk mark.

Biggles picked up his bag and walked on. Ginger did the same. Not a word was spoken.

Not until they were walking through the reception hall did Biggles speak.

Then all he said was: 'Easy, wasn't it?'

Ginger, who apparently had not noticed this piece of by-play, answered:

'I don't get it.'

'Tell you later,' murmured Biggles.

Ross and his escort were now getting into a taxi. Biggles hurried after them. 'As we are going to the same hotel, do you mind if we share your cab?' he asked.

'Get in,' replied the German, in a flat voice that suggested disinterest.

Biggles and Ginger got in. What Ross was thinking of all this Ginger could not imagine.

The soldier's face was like a mask.

The cab rattled along over a greasy road between misty lights, for a slight drizzle of rain was beginning to fall.

All Ginger could think was, this is going too well; much too well. It can't last.

However, nothing happened. As usual, when strangers travel together, no one spoke.

The atmosphere created was stiff, and

Ginger was relieved when the taxi at last pulled into the kerb outside a hotel that was clearly of the second, or even the third, class.

Biggles said he would pay the taxi, which he did, and the time occupied by this allowed the others to enter the hotel just in front of him. The door opened into the usual small, gloomy vestibule, with a reception desk on one side, and, at the far end, a flight of stairs leading to the upper rooms. Old travel posters and notices covered most of the wall space. A table littered with papers and magazines occupied the middle of the floor. A dusty aspidistra wilted in an ornamental stand in a corner.

A heavily-built, untidy-looking man, sat in shirt-sleeves at the reception desk. He looked up as the visitors entered and pushed forward the customary forms. Biggles heard him say to the man in front of him, speaking in German, 'Good evening, Herr Stresser. The same as before? So.

Number twenty-one.' As he spoke he unhooked a key and passed it over.

Danke,' acknowledged Ross's escort, and thus Biggles learned his name.

Stresser filled in two registration forms with a facility born of experience while Biggles stood at his elbow awaiting his turn. The formality complete, Stresser and Ross picked up their bags and went on up the stairs. Biggles and Ginger then filled in their forms and showed their false passports.

'A double room or two singles?' inquired the proprietor. 'Double,' answered Biggles.

The man's eyes went to Biggles' tie, and then moved up to his face. 'Want to be on the same floor as Stresser?' he asked, evidently supposing them to be engaged on the same business — which in a way they were.

'Yes.'

The man unhooked another key. 'Twenty-two. First floor. Turn right at the top of the stairs.'

'Thanks.'

Biggles, followed by Ginger, went on as directed. Biggles stopped outside number twenty-two, unlocked it and went in. He switched on the light and closed the door behind him. He laid a finger on his lips warningly.

'Careful,' he breathed. 'There may be dictaphones.' Then he smiled.

'We're doing very nicely, aren't we?' he said softly.

'It's too easy,' replied Ginger suspiciously. 'All traps are easy to get into. It's the getting out that's the job.'

'I'm not thinking of getting out,' returned Biggles, taking his small-kit from his bag and putting it on the dressing-table.

'Ross and this bloke Stresser are in the next room,' said Ginger doubtfully. 'Isn't that a bit too close to be comfortable?'

'On the contrary, I think it's all to the good,' said Biggles, examining the walls. 'I want to talk some more to Stresser. I have an idea he might let something drop. At all events he seems to have a grievance against his employers. Such men are usually ready to blab to anyone who will listen to their troubles. I wouldn't trust him a yard.'

'What about something to eat?' suggested Ginger.

'Yes, we shall have to have a bite,' admitted Biggles. 'There doesn't appear to be a dining-room in this shabby joint, so presently I'll ask Stresser if he knows of a place where we can get a meal at a reasonable price. No doubt he does. I'm hoping he'll tell us where he eats himself.'

We could join him there. After a little food and a drink he may thaw out a bit. It should make Ross feel more comfortable, too, if he sees us around.'

In the event, this little plan did not mature; for when, after a wash, Biggles went to the next room, a tap on the door produced no response.

From the proprietor he learned that Stresser and his companion had gone out. He did not say where they had gone. He may not have known.

But he named a small restaurant not far away where a reasonable meal could be obtained. Biggles went to the place hoping to find Stresser there, but in this he was disappointed. He and Ginger had a mediocre meal. They lingered over their coffee, but Stresser did not put in an appearance.

In fact, to Biggles' chagrin, they did not see either Stresser or Ross again that night. They heard them come home, but it was after midnight, and Biggles could not think of a reasonable excuse for starting a conversation at such a late hour.

The night passed without incident.

The following morning Biggles was on the move early, for he had no intention of letting his man slip through his fingers if it could be prevented.

'What are you going to do?' asked Ginger, as they dressed.

'What we do will depend entirely on what Stresser does with Ross,' returned Biggles. 'For the moment I am concerned only with keeping them in sight. It's no use thinking beyond that.'

'If we go on following Ross, Stresser, unless he is a nitwit, will get suspicious.'

'I'm afraid you're right. But we daren't lose sight of him.' 'Suppose they go to Russia?'

'That's something I'd rather not think about. But, whatever happens, we can't abandon Ross.'

'Of course not.'

'Then stop worrying. The luck has been good so far. It may go on. Always ride your luck while it lasts. The time to fret is when it goes against you. There's a chance that Ross may have learned something. If he has, he'll find a way to pass the gen on to us. For the moment we'll pack our kit, pay the bill, and then stick around to see what happens, ready to move fast if necessary.'

They went down to find the front door open. The proprietor, half dressed, was sweeping the floor. When Biggles asked for his bill he showed no emotion. This matter settled, Biggles explained that he was expecting a caller, so he would, if there was no objection, leave the bags in the vestibule until such time as he and his friend were ready to leave.

To this arrangement the proprietor agreed, and then went on with his

work. After a while a woman called him, whereupon he stood his broom against the wall and disappeared through a door into the back premises, leaving Biggles and Ginger alone. As an excuse for being there they sat on a shabby sofa and made a pretence of reading papers taken from the table.

Soon afterwards a car pulled up outside. Glancing over the top of his paper, Ginger saw a man come in — another client, presumably, from the confident way he strode to the stairs and went up. He wore a heavy overcoat with a fur collar, and carried fur gloves, which struck Ginger as odd, for while it was not exactly hot the weather could not be called cold. It did not occur to him that the man might have any connection with his own business.

'I'd say they have some queer customers here,' he murmured to Biggles.

Biggles' eyes were still on the stairs. They switched to Ginger. 'Yes,' he said slowly.

Ginger sensed something. 'What's on your mind?'

'That fellow's fur coat and gloves.'

'What about them?'

'In Paris Stresser said something to me about a fur coat. I wonder?'

What Biggles wondered was not revealed, for at that moment the sound of voices approaching the top of the stairs caused him to break off short.

Three men appeared.

They were Stresser, Ross and the man with the fur collar. But it was to Ross that Ginger's eyes

were drawn. He, too, now wore a heavy overcoat. It had not been buttoned, so that, swinging open, it showed that he no longer wore his dark suit.

He appeared to be wearing a drab grey uniform, in the manner of a battledress. On his head he wore a round fur cap, with earflaps tied on top. Stresser wore neither hat nor coat. The implication was plain.

He was not going out. The others were.

What followed occupied only a minute of time. As the three of them moved towards the door, only one showed that he was aware of Biggles and Ginger sitting there. Ross. As his eyes passed over them they seemed to flicker, as if he were trying to convey a signal.

At the same time a tiny white object dropped from his fingers to the floor. There was no time for more. Ross shook the hand that Stresser held out to him and then he and his new escort were outside. The car door slammed. The engine started. Then, to Ginger's utter dismay, Stresser turned to Biggles, making it impossible for either of them to follow a natural impulse — which was to rush out and seek a means of following the car —

without making it obvious that they were shadowing Ross. Nor was it possible, without the action being observed, to pick up the object which Ross had dropped.

'That's another one gone,' said Stresser, his lips parting in a twisted smile to expose decayed teeth.

'Where does he go from here?' asked Biggles, with a nonchalance he did not feel.

'The usual place.'

'Not a nice day for flying,' ventured Biggles, firing a shot in the dark.

Stresser shrugged. 'The weather is better along the route, they say.'

Ginger could have struck the man for his non-committal replies.

Apparently he was not such a fool as he looked. At any rate, he was giving nothing away.

'And now, I suppose, you are free to go home?' suggested Biggles, looking at Stresser.

'Yes. I now go back to Berlin for further orders.' Stresser started to walk on, but a thought seemed to strike him. 'Which way are you going?'

he asked.

'We are to wait here for the time being.'

'So. Ah, well. I may see you on the Berlin plane.'

'We'll look out for you if we go that way,' promised Biggles.

Stresser walked on. But he was not out of sight when the proprietor came back and, picking up his broom, continued his task of sweeping the floor.

Biggles moved towards the object Ross had dropped. But he was just too late to retrieve it. It had fallen on that part of the floor which had already been swept, but the hotel keeper spotted it, and with a deft flip of his broom it was in a dustpan.

Ginger, whose nerves were on edge, could have cried out. 'Hark!' exclaimed Biggles, raising a warning finger.

The proprietor stopped what he was doing to look at him. 'What is it?'

'I thought I heard someone call out in the kitchen.'

The proprietor put his dustpan on the reception desk, rested the broom against it, and then turned towards the rear of the building. The instant he was out of sight, Biggles'

fingers were in the dustpan, turning over the dirt, match sticks and cigarette ends it contained. An exclamation of satisfaction told Ginger that he had found what he was looking for. Without looking at it, Biggles put it in his pocket.

'What is it?' asked Ginger.

'No time to look now,' snapped Biggles. 'Jump to it. We've got to get back to the airport.

Our only hope is to find Ross there. Every second counts.' So saying he slammed on his hat, snatched up his

bag, and, striding through the open door to the pavement, looked up and down for a taxi.

None was in sight.

'Are you sure Ross is flying?' queried Ginger.

'No, I'm not sure,' replied Biggles crisply, 'but Stresser's remark about the weather suggested that he was. Come on.'

Together they hastened down the street towards a broad thoroughfare that crossed it at the end. Here there was a good deal of traffic, and after a brief delay they were able to pick up a cab. Biggles ordered the driver to take them to the airport.

'What's the drill when we get there?' inquired Ginger in a low voice.

'If we can't get on the same plane as Ross we might still be in time to

see which way he goes,' replied Biggles.

'What was the thing he dropped?'

'A scrap of paper rolled into a ball.' Biggles took the object from his pocket, unrolled it, and smoothed it on his knee.

Ginger saw that only one word had been written. The word was 'Kratsen.'

His eyes went to Biggles' face. 'Does that mean anything to you?' he asked.

'Not a thing.'

'Looks as if it might be the name of a place.'

'If it is, I haven't the remotest idea where it is on the map. It could be the name of anything, or a person. One thing is certain. Whatever the word stands for it must have meant something vital to Ross. He must have been pushed for time when he wrote it, or he would have said more. He had time for just one word, and that's it. Pity we couldn't have spoken to him; but it's no use thinking about that now. We can't expect the luck all our own way. We'll deal with the mystery later. Here we are.'

The car was now pulling up at the airport, outside the main entrance.

Biggles jumped out, paid the fare, and walked on into the big booking-hall, looking around anxiously. It was, it seemed, the busy hour, and there were a lot of people about, both coming and going.

From the concrete apron beyond came the clatter of aero motors. A big Berlin transport was discharging its passengers. Biggles paid no attention to them, his efforts being concentrated on finding Ross and his new escort.

It was Ginger who at last spotted them. 'There they go,' he said shortly, inclining his head towards a barrier through which the men they sought were at that moment passing.

Biggles strode to the gate, but not having a ticket was not allowed to go through; so all he and Ginger could do was stare at the retreating figures as they walked towards a twin-engined passenger plane that was clearly on the point of taking off.

'Call him!' urged Ginger desperately.

'Daren't risk it,' muttered Biggles. 'If we call attention to ourselves here, we've had it.'

The place will be stiff with snoopers.'

'What machine is that they're making for?'

'An L 1-2. Russian job. Crib of the Douglas.'

'Find out where it's bound for.'

Biggles turned to the man in charge of the barrier and put the question.

But at that moment the man slammed the gate, drowning his words, and walked out on to the concrete. The engines of the aircraft roared.

Biggles stared at the machine as it began to move. There was nothing he could do. 'We'

ve lost him,' he muttered bitterly. Ginger had never seen his face so grim.

Helpless, they watched the machine take off. Then Biggles said: 'Let's go to the inquiry office and see what we can learn there.' He turned away abruptly, and in doing so collided with one of the several

passengers of the Berlin plane who were now leaving the Customs office.

'Sorry,' apologised Biggles. The word seemed to die on his lips as he found himself looking into the eyes of the last man he expected to see there. It was Erich von Stalhein.

For an instant, the expression on the German's face made it clear that his astonishment was as great as Biggles. But he had for long been trained in the hard school of experience, and he recovered his equanimity quickly. 'Good morning, Bigglesworth,' he said suavely. 'I hardly expected to see you here.'

Biggles smiled faintly. 'I certainly didn't expect to see you, either,' he admitted.

'I'm quite sure you didn't,' returned von Stalhein, with a sort of grim humour. His eyes were now looking past Biggles' shoulder.

Biggles knew why. 'If you're expecting friends, we won't detain you.'

'As a matter of fact, I am rather busy,' said von Stalhein. 'We shall meet again, no doubt.'

'I have quite a lot to do myself,' murmured Biggles.

'So I imagine,' came back von Stalhein dryly. And with that he walked on briskly.

Biggles made for the exit. 'Pity about that,' was all he said to Ginger.

Ginger was watching von Stalhein over his shoulder. 'He's gone to the Police Bureau.'

'Of course. We've got about fifteen seconds to get out of this.'

Outside the building Biggles looked up and down. Not a taxi was in sight, but a number of private cars were parked on the opposite side of the road, which, at this point, being a terminus, widened to a broad area.

Without speaking he walked over to them. The doors of the first one were locked. The same with the second. It was a case of third time lucky.

The door of the next car, a big saloon, swung open. 'In you get,' he told Ginger crisply.

Ginger, his eyes on the exit of the building opposite, scrambled in.

As Biggles dropped into his seat and slammed the door, von Stalhein, with three police officers, appeared in attitudes of urgency. They looked up and down. By the time they had turned their attention to the cars Biggles had his engine running. This, inevitably, called attention to it. The police started forward, but the car was now moving. 'Hold your hat,'

warned Biggles, and the car shot forward.

Ginger saw a policeman dash back into the hall. He passed the information.

'Gone to the phone,' guessed Biggles. 'I'm afraid we've started something.'

'We shan't get far in a stolen car,' declared Ginger.

'We shouldn't have got anywhere had we waited for a taxi,' Biggles told him. As the car raced on he continued whimsically: 'There's one comforting thought when one is engaged on a job of this sort. One can do anything without making matters worse. From the moment we got the wrong side of the Iron Curtain we were booked for a high jump if we were caught. So the worst that can happen to us now is no worse than it was an hour ago.'



By the time they had turned their attention to the cars
Biggles had his engine running.

(See p. 67)

'An hour ago we had a chance of getting home,' reminded Ginger cuttingly, as Biggles swerved to avoid a careless cyclist.

'We've still got a chance.'

'I wouldn't call it a bright one.'

'Maybe we can do something to brighten it,' said Biggles lightly. 'Think how dull life would be if everything was always bright.' 'What foul luck we had to bump into von Stalhein.'

'Just one of those things, laddie. You can't expect jam on your bread all the time.'

On the outskirts of the city a policeman appeared in the middle of the road, arm raised. He realised just in time that this will not stop a car if the driver does nothing about it. Wisely, he gave it right of way. A bullet from his pistol whanged against some metal part of the vehicle.

After that Biggles went only a short distance. 'I think that's far enough,' he observed, and running the car against the kerb in a busy street, got out. 'Cars wear number plates,' he remarked. 'Fortunately, pedestrians don't have to, so we shall be safer on our feet.'

Ginger, too, got out. 'Where are you going to make for?' he asked, as they turned their backs on the car.

'I was just wondering the same thing,' replied Biggles. 'I think for a start we'll go back to the hotel.'

Ginger pulled up dead. 'Are you out of your mind?' he cried. 'Probably,'

answered Biggles sadly.

CHAPTER VI

Money Talks

For a little while they walked on, threading their way along the busy pavements. At last Ginger's patience broke down.

'What's the idea of going back to the hotel?' he demanded. 'Inside an hour the police will have contacted every hotel in the city to find out where we stayed last night.'

'That's how I reckoned it,' agreed Biggles. 'It gives us an hour to do what I have in mind.'

'And what's that?'

'Have a chat with Stresser — if he's still there.'

'Stresser! Why not give ourselves up at the police station and have done with it?'

'We may arrive there eventually.'

'But Stresser! That's asking for it.'

'Possibly, but not necessarily. The point is, Stresser is the only man we know who may know where Ross has gone. If we lose touch with Stresser we've lost the trail. In a word, he is now a vital connecting link — the only one we have, in fact.'

Ginger became mildly sarcastic. 'What makes you think he'll tell you what he knows?'

Biggles smiled. 'A feeling in my bones. I have in my pocket an argument which seldom fails with his type.'

'A gun?'

'Nothing so crude. Something much more genteel and effective.' 'What, then?'

'Money. If, as they say, money talks, a big wad can fairly scream.'

'But the man's a Communist!'

'So what? I have yet to meet a Communist who wasn't interested in money.'

It's not having any that makes him a Communist. He wants some, and the only way he can think of to get it is, as he hopes, by getting his hands into the pockets of those who have.'

'Communists hate capitalists.'

'Of course. But they'd all be capitalists if they knew how. I know one.'

Apart from being a bit cracked, he's not a bad sort. How does he spend his time? I'll tell you. Filling in football coupons. For fun? Not on your life. He's hoping to get a lot of money quickly without working for it. The day he wins a big prize, if he ever does, he'll stop being a Communist. He'll be all against the Reds for fear they take his money off him. I'll wager Stresser became a Communist because he thought there was easy money in it. Now he finds there isn't. He as good as told me that he's fed up with the game because he isn't paid enough. That means he'll switch to anyone who offers him more. You watch it.

Anyhow, it's worth a chance.'

'It's taking a pretty big chance.'

'If you don't take chances, you don't take anything.' Biggles raised a finger to a cruising taxi and named the hotel as his destination.

'What comes after the hotel?' inquired Ginger, as the taxi threaded its way through the traffic.

'We'll lie low while we think things over. A little foresight has provided us with a hide-out for use in just such a situation as this.'

A couple of minutes later the cab dropped them at the hotel. The proprietor was still tidying the vestibule. Biggles asked him if Herr Stresser had left. The man said no. He thought he was still in his room.

Biggles went on up the stairs. A tap on the door of number twenty-one caused it to be opened by the man they were looking for. 'Oh, it's you,' he said, rather uncomfortably.

'Were you expecting someone else?' asked Biggles.

'You never know who's going to call on you in this business,' grumbled the man.

'How right you are,' murmured Biggles. 'May we come in?' 'What do you want?'

'Before I answer that question we'd better have the door shut,' said Biggles quietly.

Followed by Ginger, he went in and closed the door behind them. 'Now,' he went on, facing Stresser, who was by this time looking somewhat alarmed,

'could you use some money?'

Stresser stared. 'M-money?' he stammered. 'How much money?' 'Say, a thousand West Marks.'

The German's jaw fell. 'What for?' he blurted. Then suspicion leapt into his eyes. 'Who are you?' he asked nervously, flicking his tongue over his lips. He dropped into a chair.

'We're British Intelligence agents,' Biggles told him bluntly. 'All right — sit still. We're not going to hurt you. You complained to me that you weren't paid enough for what you were doing. I can put that right.'

Biggles showed his wad.

Expressions of fear, doubt and avarice, chased each other across the German's face. At the finish fear dominated the rest, and Ginger knew why. Stresser was afraid that the offer was a trap set by his own employers.

'Well, what about it?' asked Biggles impatiently. 'I've no time to waste.' He toyed with the roll of notes suggestively.

Stresser's eyes glistened. The notes seemed to fascinate him. 'How do I know you're what you say you are?'

'You'll have to take that on trust,' Biggles told him. 'You wouldn't expect me, being what I am, to walk about this city with proofs of identity in my pocket?'

'No,' conceded Stresser.

'Then make up your mind. If you feel inclined to talk you can pull out, with the money in your pocket, and be in Western Germany in an hour or two. You'd be safe there.'

Stresser drew a deep breath. 'What do you want to know?' 'Where have they taken your new recruit, Ross?'

'So you were following us?'

'Of course. But you're wasting time. Where is Ross?'

Stresser cleared his throat. 'He's on his way to Korea.' It was Biggles' turn to stare.

Suspicion clouded his eyes. 'Korea? What are you trying to give me?'

'Well, not exactly Korea. Actually, its Manchuria. But it's to do with the Korean war.'

'What's the name of the place?'

aratsen.'

'Did you tell Ross he was going to Kratsen?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'He kept asking where he was going, so I told him to keep him quiet. It was too late for him to back out, so it didn't matter.'

'Did you tell him where Kratsen was?'

'I told him it was in Poland.'

'Why lie about it?'

Stresser shrugged. 'One has to lie in this dirty game — you know that.'

'Is Ross on his way to Kratsen now?'

'Well, not exactly.'

'What do you mean by that? Don't talk in riddles.'

'Well, he should have gone direct to Kratsen, but he was a bit difficult, so he's been allowed to make a call first.'

'What was he difficult about?'

'He wanted to see a friend of his.'

'What was his name?'

'Macdonald. I brought him out some time ago.'

'I gather he isn't at Kratsen?'

'Not yet.'

'Where is he?'

'In the Soviet Zone of Berlin.'

'Doing what?'

'Broadcasting.'

'Propaganda?'

'Of course.'

Biggles' face remained expressionless. 'So at this moment Ross is on his way to Berlin to see Macdonald?'

'Yes.'

'How long will he stay there?'

'I don't know. One day perhaps. Perhaps a week. It depends. But afterwards he'll go on to Kratsen. I expect Macdonald will go with him.'

He must be about finished in Berlin.'

'What's going on at Kratsen?'

'Broadcasting. There's a new radio station there. Men are made to broadcast to the United Nations Forces in Korea, saying what a good time they're having.'

Ginger could now see daylight. He felt sure that Stresser was telling the truth. He had heard of such broadcasts.

Biggles' eyes were still on Stresser. 'Suppose Ross refuses to broadcast?'

Stresser shrugged.

'One last question,' said Biggles curtly. 'Where will Ross stay in Berlin? It will be in the Soviet Zone, of course?'

'Yes. The Hotel Prinz Karl, in the Zindenplatzer. I've stayed there myself sometimes. It's one of the regular places, like this.'

Ginger was looking at Biggles. His face, now set in hard lines, seemed to have aged suddenly. That the information Stresser had given him had shocked him severely was plain.

'Did you tell Ross what was in store for him?' Biggles asked Stresser.

'No. I thought it might depress him.'

'That was considerate of you,' sneered Biggles. He tossed the roll of

notes on the table. '

All right, that's all,' he said. 'My advice to you is get out of this country, and keep out.

Try to double-cross me and I'll remember it if we ever meet again.'
With that he turned on his heel and left the room.

Outside, in the corridor, he turned for a moment to face Ginger.

'Manchuria, of all places,

' he breathed. 'I wasn't thinking of anything outside Europe. Poor Ross. He'll think we've forsaken him.'

'But we haven't,' protested Ginger.

'Not on your life,' grated Biggles.

'Stresser was telling the truth?'

'I'm pretty sure of it, otherwise he needn't have mentioned Macdonald.

But come on, let'

s get out of this place for a start.'

They went on down the stairs and into the street. The proprietor did not speak to them, and they did not speak to him. But five minutes later, from the end of the road, when Ginger looked back, he saw a car pull up outside the hotel. Some policemen alighted busily and went in. 'We cut it fine. I've an idea Stresser has left it a bit late,' he told Biggles. 'If the police find that money on him, he's had it.'

'I shan't lose any sleep on that account,' rejoined Biggles caustically, and strode on.

'You know where you're going, I hope?' queried Ginger.

'I made a point of studying a map of the city before we left home,' answered Biggles. '

You'd better not walk with me. The police will be looking for two men.

Drop behind a bit.' He walked on, keeping to the main streets, where traffic, both vehicular and pedestrian, was most congested.

Twenty minutes later, after crossing a bridge over what Ginger took to be the River Moldau, they were in what was clearly the old quarter of the city. A fine drizzle of rain was now falling again. It did nothing to brighten the aspect of rows of houses that were obviously of great age.

There were some small shops. Some of the goods offered in them looked as ancient as the houses. Ginger had no idea of where they were, but Biggles seemed to know, although more than once he looked up at street names on corner houses.

There was very little traffic now, and what few people were about hurried along under dripping umbrellas.

At last Biggles waited for Ginger to join him. 'This is the street,' he said and, going on a short distance, turned into a drab little shop which carried over the door a board with the name Johann Smasrik, in faded paint. The establishment appeared, from the things in the dingy window, to be something between a jobbing tailor's and a second-hand clothes store. A bell clanged as he opened the door, to be greeted by the warm, sickly smell of ironing.

Ginger closed the door behind them and turned to find that they were being regarded by a mild-looking little man of late middle age, who peered at them over an old pair of steel-rimmed glasses balanced on the end of his nose. There seemed to be something wrong with his figure, and



A bell clanged.

as he put down the hot iron with which he had been working, and turned towards them, it could be seen

that he was deformed, one shoulder being higher than the other.

Everything about him, his threadbare clothes and his surroundings, spoke of extreme poverty and a dreary existence. Wherefore Ginger's first emotion was one of pity.

The man was still looking at his visitors questioningly. 'Do you speak German?' asked Biggles in that language, his left hand holding his lapel.

Va, mein Herr.'

Biggles went on. 'The weather is very unsettled.'

The man agreed. 'It is always raining.' He sighed.

'I have lost a button from my coat,' said Biggles.

'I wondered if you could match it for me?'

The little shopkeeper's manner seemed to change. 'English?' he asked softly.

'Yes.'

'Trouble?'

'Yes.'

'Were you followed?'

'No.'

'Come inside while I make sure.' The man spoke English in a cultured voice without a trace of accent. He opened a door at the back of the shop.

Biggles and Ginger went through and found themselves in a little living-room that was in keeping with the shop.

'Wait,' said their host, and returned to the shop.

He was back in two or three minutes. 'I think it's all right,' he said in a soft voice that in some curious way conveyed confidence. Then he smiled. 'Of course, one can never be sure. Tell me quickly, what has happened?'

Biggles answered. 'A special mission brought us to Prague. We did our work, but at the airport we were recognised by an enemy agent whom we thought was in London. He fetched the police. Not seeing a taxi, we took a car from the parking-place, abandoned it in the city, and then made our way here.'

'Which means that you are on the run with the security police looking for you?'

'Exactly.'

'What can I do for you?'

'We're looking for somewhere to lie low until we can make arrangements to get out of the country. Can you fix us up?'

'Who gave you this address?'

'Number seven.'

'I see. Then you'd better stay here,' said the man thoughtfully.

'Naturally, I don't like people using this house, but in this case I see no alternative. The address would only have been given to you in a matter of the gravest importance.'

Biggles looked at the man curiously. 'You speak English very well.'

'Naturally, since I am British,' was the reply. 'My name is easily remembered. It is Smith

— yes, even when I am in England. Come this way. I cannot leave the shop for very long in case a customer comes in, but we will talk later.'

The agent led them up three flights of rickety wooden stairs to an attic which was nearly full of lumber — useless stuff most of it appeared to be. There was an old table, some broken chairs, with numerous cases and boxes half-buried under old clothes, curtains, pieces of carpet, and the like. The only light filtered through a grimy skylight in the sloping roof.

'Now listen carefully,' said Smith. 'You will stay in this room and not leave it on any account without my permission. Make yourselves as comfortable as the place permits, but disturb nothing; and leave nothing about, not a crumb, or a speck of cigarette ash, or anything that might suggest that the room has been occupied. You will realise that an establishment of this sort is subject at any moment, day or night, to a police raid, and a thorough search. One thing, however small; not in keeping with the rest, could produce unfortunate consequences.'

Biggles nodded. 'I understand. Have you any reason to suppose that you are suspect?'

'No. But it is unlikely that I would know if I was. One never knows in our business. But I shall know now, definitely, within a few hours.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'I mean this. If the secret police had any reason to suspect this house they would not show their hand at once. The only bird they would catch, perhaps, would be me. They would wait for such a moment as this. When, in an hour or two, you are not found, it will be known that you have gone into hiding. Then the police will strike at every establishment to which the slightest suspicion is attached. Such raids usually occur after dark, when a cordon can be drawn round the suspected house without alarming the occupants. In daylight such an operation could hardly be carried out unobserved.' Smith smiled. 'So you should be safe for an hour or two, anyway.'

'I follow,' murmured Biggles.

'But if there should be a raid you still have one way of escape,'

continued Smith. 'All the clutter you see here appears to have been thrown in haphazard. At least, that was the intention. But far from that being the case it has been carefully arranged to provide me with an emergency exit. In the event of trouble, I want you to use this way out, because were you found here it would be the end of me as well as you.'

Smith pointed to the skylight. 'That is the way you could go. Downstairs, under my counter, there is a button on

the floor. When I press my foot on it, it operates a buzzer concealed in one of these boxes. Should you hear the buzzer, therefore, you will know that the security police are below. That will be your signal for a swift, but silent, departure. The table, as you see, is under the skylight. By putting this box on it the skylight can be reached. Having gone through —

closing the skylight behind you of course — you will find yourself on a sloping roof. Turn to the right. It is ten yards to the end of the gable.

There you will find a chimney stack. Hidden in the nearest chimney-pot there is a rope. This will enable you to descend the twenty feet to a flat roof below. Take the rope with you, for you will need it again.

Apart from that, it would not do to leave it hanging there, as it might be seen from the street. Carry on along the flat roof to the end of the block. Below, there is the yard of a scrap metal merchant. A door in the wooden fence on your right opens into the street. After that you would have to take your luck.'

'And what would you be doing all this time?' inquired Biggles.

Smith shrugged his hunched shoulder. 'I should stay behind and bluff the thing out. That would give you time to get away. But don't worry about me. That's as much as I have time to say now. I shan't operate the alarm signal unless things look serious. If it should happen, what are you going to do with those?' He pointed to the two handbags. 'Should you have to leave by the roof you would find them in the way;

yet should the place be searched it wouldn't do for them to be found here.'

Biggles agreed. 'What do you suggest we do with them?'

'I think you had better let me have them until the danger period is over,' said Smith. 'I have a place, where I keep some of my own things, where they would be safe. You can have them any time you want them.' He picked up the bags. 'I'll bring you some food in the lunch hour. We'll talk again then.'

'Thank you,' acknowledged Biggles.

Smith smiled again. 'No need to thank me. I'm here to do a job and I try to make the best of it. See you later.' He went out.

'Stout fellow, that,' said Biggles, finding a seat on a box.

CHAPTER VII

Over the Roof

I

C t's going to be a bit of a bind, sitting here twiddling our thumbs while wretched Ross is flown to the far side of the world,' remarked Ginger presently.

'We should have found it more of a bind had it not been for our friend Smith,' returned Biggles, lighting a cigarette and putting the dead match in his pocket. 'A queer type,' he went on. 'I've met several of them. But then, no normal fellow would take on such a job, spending his life in a hostile country, never knowing when an axe is going to drop on his neck.

Beheading, by the way, is a common method of liquidating spies in this part of the world.'

'Why did you have to remind me of that?' complained Ginger.

Biggles smiled.

After a little while Smith returned with a basket of cold food. 'This is the best I can do,'

he said as he set the basket on the box. Are you short of money?'

inquired Biggles.

'Of course not. But if I started buying more than I could eat myself people might wonder who it was for. And here, when people wonder, they talk. They talk out of fear, hoping that by getting someone else into trouble they will avoid it themselves. You have no idea of the sort of life one lives here. The place is rotten with government snoopers and spies.

No man dare trust another.'

'What on earth made you choose such a miserable job?' asked Ginger curiously.

Smith shrugged his crooked shoulder. 'With me it isn't so much a job as an occupation,'

he explained. 'After all, how could I serve the country? Look at me. As a lad I was crazy to join the army, but a fall in the hunting-field buckled my spine and that was that. My people put me in the hands of a Czech specialist who thought he could cure me. That's how I came to be here in the first place. The cure didn't work, but I got to know the country, the people and the language, so I stayed on. Of course, it was all very different here then. When the war came along the Intelligence people at home were glad to have someone with my qualifications. That's all. I've been here ever since.'

'Do you never go home?' asked Ginger.

'I was just going home when Russia grabbed the country. I was asked to stay and here I am. It isn't as dull as you may suppose. A lot of quite remarkable people pass through my hands, and from them I gather interesting news.'

'But surely you are in touch with home?' prompted Biggles.

'Of course, otherwise what use would I be? I have radio. But not here. It would be dangerous to use it regularly, but it is available should an emergency arise. Why did you ask the question? Have you a message to transmit?'

'It's a matter of getting home,' answered Biggles. 'In view of what has happened it would be futile to try to get out of the country by any form of public transport. If I could make contact with home I could arrange for an aircraft to come out and pick me up. That's all laid on.'

'Are you ready to return home?'

'Yes. There's nothing more we can do here. Fresh plans will have to be made.'

'I gather you haven't actually got an appointment with an aircraft?'

No. It wasn't practicable to make one, because when we started we had no idea of where we should end up. Aside from that, we had no knowledge of suitable landing-grounds behind the Iron Curtain.'

'I may be able to help you there.'

Biggles looked interested. 'You mean, you know of such a place?'

'Yes. It is one I have used before. You are not the first people for whom I have had to arrange transport home. By air is the best way, and the quickest.'

'Where is this place, this landing-ground?'

'It's a field, on a farm, about twelve miles from here.'

'Would you send a message home for us, giving the pinpoint of the field, a date and a time? Given that information, my own fellows could come out and pick us up.'

'Of course I'll send the message. Let me have it and I'll send it through tonight. There's no need for me to give the location of the field. My contact in London knows it. Just tell me the date and the time.' Smith got up from the box on which he had been seated. 'I must go back to the shop now.'

'What time would you send the message?' asked Biggles.

'About six. The air is stiff with radio at that hour, so my signal —

which will be in code, of course — may pass unnoticed by enemy listeners.'

'Six! That means we could get a machine out tonight!'

'Certainly, if there's no hold-up at the other end. Give me your code cipher and the signal will be delivered to your chief immediately it is received. See you later.' Smith went back downstairs.

Biggles turned to Ginger. 'The sooner our people know what's happened, the better.'

'How about Ross? He'll be feeling pretty sick by this time.'

'I haven't forgotten him. Obviously, we shall have to get him out, but it may take a little longer than we expected. I don't see how we can get to him, though, direct from here.'

'I imagine you'll ask Algy and Bertie to fetch us out?'

'Of course. They're standing by. If Smith sends the message at six they should have it by seven. An hour should be long enough for them to get weaving. Another four hours brings us to midnight. Allow a margin of an hour and the machine should be able to get here by one in the morning.

The only thing that might upset the schedule is the weather, but there's nothing we can do about that. We'll fix things with Smith next time he comes up.'

They did not see their host until a little after five, when he reappeared with tea and cakes. Biggles had his signal written out ready. Smith looked at it, and said he would see about getting it put into code forthwith.

The thing that worries me most is the weather,' Biggles told him. 'It

was pretty putrid this morning. What's it like now? My pilot must have reasonable visibility for a job of this sort.'

'It's still raining a little, but the clouds are breaking, and the immediate forecast is fair generally.'

'Good,' said Biggles, pouring out a cup of tea.

'I'll leave you now, to get things fixed up,' said Smith. The plan, as I shall try to organise it, will be this. First, I'll get the signal off.

When receipt is acknowledged from the other end I'll see about the rest, which really means no more than getting you to the landing ground. I can't go with you myself for several reasons, and obviously it wouldn't be wise for you, not knowing the country, to try to find the field yourselves in the dark. At eight-forty-five you will stand by, ready to move off. At nine, a farm cart that has taken vegetables to the central market will pull up outside the scrap-metal yard which I have already mentioned. It's at the corner, about fifty yards from my door. I'd rather the cart didn't stop outside the house. If you hear the driver speak to his horse you will know that no one is in sight. Get into the cart. Cover yourselves with the old sacks which you will find in it. There's no need for you to say anything to the driver. He will indicate when you have arrived at the objective. The journey will take a good three hours. Once you have seen the field the rest will be up to you. I'm sorry if I appear to have made the thing sound melodramatic, but in my experience it doesn't do to leave anything to chance. Success in this sort of operation is more often than not determined by careful planning before the start.'

'How right you are,' agreed Biggles.

'Is there anything you can think of that you might require?' 'We're pretty well equipped, but I'd like a powerful torch, to bring the machine down.'

'I'll get you one.'

'One other thing. What happens if, for any reason, the plane doesn't

turn up? Weather conditions or engine trouble might upset the timetable.'

'Yes, that's a point,' conceded Smith. 'I'll make arrangements for the same cart to come back, at dawn, with a load of vegetables. Don't try to get here on it. Just show yourselves to the driver. He'll let me know you're still in the country and I'll try to arrange something. On no account try to get back here by yourselves.'

'Fair enough,' agreed Biggles.

Smith departed.

'I don't know what the country would do without people like that,' murmured Ginger. '

Smith must have nerves of steel to stand the strain of this sort of existence. We take chances, I know, but we keep on the move and have time to get our breath between shows. He's stuck here, without friends, day in and day out.'

'And the people at home take it all for granted — except those in the know,' answered Biggles moodily. 'All the same, I wouldn't say he's entirely without friends. There must be a lot of people in Czechoslovakia who are browned off with being pushed around by the Russians.'

'You know,' went on Ginger, 'I can't help thinking what a stinking bit of bad luck it was, running into von Stalhein as we did. I bet he's fairly set things buzzing.'

'As long as he doesn't come buzzing at Smith's front door, I don't mind,'

averred Biggles.

'Smith must know that every time he takes in people like us, he's taking his life in his hands. But, there, he must be well able to take

care of himself or he wouldn't have lasted as long as he has.' He looked at his watch. 'The tiresome part of this sort of scheme is the waiting, with nothing to do,' he muttered.

At about seven o'clock, with the daylight fading, Smith came back with some sandwiches. 'Better have a last snack before you go,' he said cheerfully. 'We're all set.'

Everything is arranged. My contact in London has acknowledged my signal.

Your message has been passed on to your department, with implicit instructions for finding the field. The plane should touch down at one in the morning. Come down just before nine. I'

ll be in the shop, keeping an eye on things. Don't leave anything about, not even a crumb.

,

'What's the weather like?' queried Biggles.

'Pretty miserable, but it's improving. The sky should be clear by zero hour.'

'Thank goodness for that.'

'See you presently,' said Smith, and went out.

Ginger watched him go, not knowing that he would not see him again.

The next hour and a half passed slowly, as is always the case when important events are impending. The grey light that filtered through the skylight became weaker, and finally died. The dim twilight in the attic gave way to darkness. Not even a cigarette glowed, for Biggles had refrained from smoking for some time, rather than leave any ash about. Only his wrist watch, at which he looked with increasing

frequency, glowed like a luminous eye.

At last he got up. 'Okay,' he said. 'It's a quarter to nine. Let's go down.'

So saying he walked over to the door and opened it. Simultaneously there came a peremptory knocking on what sounded like the door of the shop.

Confirmation of this impression came a few seconds later when the bell jangled, announcing that the door had been opened.

Biggles did not move. Ginger, too, stood still with his heart in his mouth, as the saying is.

Up the narrow stairs came the murmur of voices, muffled by distance. Then came the sound for which Ginger was by this time prepared, although he still hoped that his fears were groundless. Somewhere in the room behind them a buzzer buzzed urgently. It was a simple sound, but in the circumstances there was something so sinister about it that Ginger experienced a feeling of chill down his spine.

Biggles closed the door carefully, quietly. 'Apparently we don't leave by the front door, after all,' he said calmly. 'The skylight it is. Up you go.'

'What about Smith?' protested Ginger.

'What about him?'

'We can't just bolt and leave him.'

'Use your head,' said Biggles curtly. 'If we're found on his premises he won't have an earthly. With us out of the way he'll hold his own. He must have made provision for this sort of situation. You're wasting time. Get cracking.'

Ginger delayed no longer. In the light of the torch provided by Smith, held by Biggles; he climbed on to the table, and then on the box that stood on it. This enabled him to reach the single large pane of glass above his head. He pushed it up, and allowed it to fall back gently on its hinges. A pull and he was through, lying flat, groping desperately

OVER THE ROOF



Groping desperately for a hold on the sloping roof.

for a hold on the sloping roof, aghast at what he saw. A few feet below him the roof ended in a black void. From other, similar holes of darkness rose the misshapen gables of ancient roofs, with here and there a gaunt chimney pointing like a black finger at the murky sky.

What struck him at once was, Smith must have arranged his escape route in dry weather.

He could have had no idea of what the old tiles would be like after rain.

The roof might have been smeared with grease.

'Move along,' said a voice at his elbow, and, twisting his face round, he saw Biggles beside him, replacing the skylight.

'Move along,' muttered Biggles again. 'What are you waiting for?'

Ginger gasped. 'This is frightful,' he managed to get out. 'If I move, I shall slide off'

'You can't spend the rest of your life where you are,' said Biggles tersely. 'Get weaving.'

If the police look through the skylight they'll see us.'

The next five minutes were to Ginger something in the nature of a nightmare. Spread-eagled flat on the roof he inched his way along, fingers pressing against the tiles for any slight projection which might help him. Once a piece of moss came away in his hand and he thought he was gone; and he did in fact slide a little way before a protruding nail gave him respite. His eyes never left the chimney stack which was his objective. He thought he would never reach it. When he did, he clawed at it as a drowning man might clutch at a lifebelt; and there he clung, panting, striving to steady a racing heart, watching the black shape that he knew was Biggles making the dreadful passage. At the last moment, Biggles, too, started to slide; but with one arm round the chimney stack Ginger was able to give him a hand. For a nerve-shattering moment Ginger feared that the whole stack would come crashing down under their combined weight as Biggles drew himself up. But then the immediate danger was past, and they both paused to recover from the shock of the ordeal.

'By thunder! That wasn't funny,' remarked Biggles, breathing heavily.

'Are you telling me?' panted Ginger.

'Let's get on or we shall miss the cart,' urged Biggles.

Ginger, it may be admitted, in the anxiety of the moment, had forgotten all about the cart.

Slowly and with infinite care Biggles pulled himself erect and put a hand in the chimney-pot. It came out holding the rope which, yard by yard, was withdrawn. Ginger guided the loose end over the edge of the gable, from which the chimney was an extension. What lay below he could not see, but according to Smith there was a flat roof. He stared down, but the starlight was dim with mist, or cloud, and he could see nothing distinctly.

Biggles made a running knot round the chimney. 'Down you go,' he ordered.

The rest was simple. Ginger went hand over hand down the rope and soon found himself on a flat surface. The relief, after the strain, was almost overwhelming. Biggles appeared beside him, and brought the rope down with a thud. They coiled it, picked it up, and advanced cautiously until another pool of gloom appeared. Still nothing could be seen distinctly, but below them was obviously the yard of the scrap-metal merchant.

There was a little delay while a projection to which the rope could be fastened was found. Then Ginger went down, to stumble with a clatter on a heap of junk.

'Do you have to make so much noise?' muttered Biggles shortly, as he joined him.

'Sorry, but I can't see in the dark,' answered Ginger coldly, wiping filthy hands on his jacket.

Biggles buried the rope under a heap of rubbish. Then he looked at his watch. 'Five minutes to go,' he whispered. 'This way.'

They could see the street now — or, rather, the position of it — by the glow of lamps.

Getting to it without making a noise was another matter, for the place was strewn with old metal objects of every description, from tin cans, bedsteads and fireplaces to the bodies of ancient vehicles. However, the short journey to a low wooden fence that ran between the yard and the street was made without disturbance, and there a halt was called while Biggles, looking over the fence, made a quick reconnaissance.

'No sign of the cart,' he reported presently. The corner is just along to the left. There are two cars outside the shop, which means that either the place is being searched or Smith is being questioned. There are one or two people moving about, two of them standing by one of the cars, but they are too far away for me to make out who or what they are.

Police, probably. There's nothing more we can do except sit tight and wait for the cart.'

They squatted, Ginger praying fervently that the cart would be on time, and hoping every moment to hear the clatter of hooves. Instead, the sound that came to his ears was of slow footsteps approaching. That at least two persons were responsible was revealed presently by the murmur of voices. The footsteps approached at the dead-slow pace of men who were waiting for something.

Biggles touched Ginger on the arm and got into the back seat of an old wheelless car, the door of which gaped open. Ginger joined him. The footsteps came nearer. Two voices were talking in German. Ginger's nerves twitched as he recognised one of them. It belonged to von Stalhein. He was saying to his companion: '

But you don't know this man Bigglesworth. I do. I've been trying to pin him down for years, but he's as slippery as an eel.'

'We should have found him by now,' answered the other. 'We've covered all the likely places.'

'Exactly,' replied von Stalhein, sarcasm creeping into his voice. 'All the likely places.'

You will never find this man by looking in likely places. He has a curious knack of appearing where one would least expect him. If you are sure that he must still be in Prague, the chances are that he is miles away.'

'All roads, airports, and even known landing grounds, are being watched.'

'If you ask my opinion, I'd say he's already on his way to Berlin.'

'Impossible!'

'I've stopped using that word where Bigglesworth is concerned.' 'But how could he know of our arrangements?'

'He could have got the information from Stresser.'

'Stresser swears he knows nothing of the man.'

'Then where did he get all that money?'

'His story is that he got it through a black market deal in Paris. It's possible. We know he was once mixed up with a gang that specialised in that sort of thing.'

'All right. Have it your own way,' said von Stalhein. The footsteps stopped. Then he went on: 'What is this place here?'

'It looks like a refuse dump.'

'Was it covered?'

'No. At least, not as far as I know.'

'Why not?'

'How could they get here without being seen? Don't worry. If Bigglesworth was in that house he is still in it, for the simple reason that I've got all exits, back and front, covered.'

Don't try to make me believe that this superman can fly like a bird.'

'It wouldn't surprise me to see him do just that,' answered von Stalhein in a hard, bitter voice. His companion laughed.

But it was not this that made Ginger stiffen suddenly. From somewhere not far away came the sound of iron-shod hooves on a hard road.

'What's this coming?' asked von Stalhein.

'A farm cart, by the look of it,' was the reply. Cynical humour crept into the voice. 'Are you expecting to find Bigglesworth inside it?'

'I've known more unlikely things than that,' rejoined von Stalhein grimly. 'I wouldn't let any vehicle leave this street without being searched.'

'Well, that is easily arranged,' said the other. 'We'll do it if it will steady your nerves.'

'I'd have this yard searched, too, in case he managed to slip out,' said von Stalhein.

The cart, moving at walking pace, drew nearer.

CHAPTER VIII

A Ride in the Country

Two pairs of footsteps now receded a little way, as if the men were going to meet the cart, which was coming up the street past the shop. A crisp order cut into the night air. The cart stopped.

What was said to the driver, or what the driver told the police, Ginger never knew; for at this juncture Biggles touched him on the arm and whispered: 'Let's get out of here. Now's the time, while attention is on the cart.'

There was no trouble in getting to the fence. Biggles followed this along to get as far away as possible from the shop, and then, climbing it, lay flat, close against it, until Ginger joined him. From there they wormed their way along to the corner. To Ginger it was the worst moment of all, for there was nothing between them and their enemies, and he expected every instant to hear the alarm given. The murk, which had made things so difficult on the roof, may have saved them from observation. Not until they were round the corner did he breathe freely. Looking about him he saw that they were in a narrow street running at right-angles to the one they had just left. They were, in fact, at a four crossways. Not a soul was in sight, although from somewhere farther up the street came the sound of music and singing — emanating from a café, he supposed.

Biggles crossed the street and stood in a doorway. 'We'll wait here for the cart,' he decided. 'Not knowing which way the driver will turn, we daren't go any farther.'

So they waited. They heard brisk footsteps on the pavement, followed by a good deal of noise in the scrap heap, which told them that von Stalhein's advice about making a search was being followed. Then came the clip-clop of hooves, and the crunch of wheels announced that the cart had resumed its journey.

It did not stop at the corner. It went straight on. Perhaps the driver had been unnerved by what had happened. If so, he could hardly be

blamed.

He may have had the wit to realise that if he stopped again the police would overtake him to ascertain why.

Realising that the cart was not going to stop, Biggles started off along the pavement, keeping more or less level with it, and as far as possible in the shadows. A short distance ahead a street lamp threw a pale radiance across both pavement and road. Ginger eyed it with misgivings, for, being still within view of the shop, although some distance from it, it obviously represented a zone of danger. But Biggles, it seemed, had no intention of crossing it. In an area darker than the rest, caused by some high buildings, he suddenly said, 'Come on,' and, darting to the rear of the cart, vaulted into it. Ginger did the same.

Once more, lying on a pile of empty sacks, he waited for the signal that would announce their discovery; but when it did not come he relaxed with a sigh of relief.

The cart trundled on. If the driver had seen their furtive arrival he gave no sign of it.

Ginger could see only a vague silhouette perched high in front of him. As a matter of detail, that was all he ever did see of their unknown ally.

The cart went on at a speed that never varied. Clip-clop ... clip-clop went the hooves on the hard road. Occasionally the driver made an uncouth noise, presumably to encourage his horse.

The drizzle had now stopped altogether, and large, starry patches of sky showed that the clouds were dispersing. Still, the night air was chilly, and Ginger was glad to wrap himself in the sacks that still smelt strongly of onions and turnips. Not that he cared about that. His only emotion was one of relief at being out of an unpleasantly tight corner.

Clip-clop ... clip-clop ...

One hour, or it may have been two, passed, and still the hooves beat their monotonous rhythm on the macadam. To Ginger the sound had become part of his existence.

Eventually he must have dozed, and it may have been the cessation of the sound that aroused him. At all events, he was suddenly aware that the cart had stopped. He started up, looking at Biggles. Biggles was looking at the driver. The driver said not a word, but pointed with his whip to the right-hand side of the road. Biggles dismounted. Ginger followed. The driver clicked his tongue. The harness strained. The wheels crunched.

Clip-clop ... clip-clop, went the hooves.

Ginger stood with Biggles on the grass verge while the sound faded slowly into the darkness.

'Twenty past midnight,' said Biggles, his voice sounding strange after the long silence. '

We've forty minutes to spare. It may not be too long. Let's get our bearings. The driver pointed this way. Thank goodness the weather's still improving.'

They walked along a low hedge until they came to a gate. This they climbed, to find themselves in a flat field of stubble of unknown extent, for the boundaries were lost in the gloom of distance. At one point a single yellow light showed the position of a cottage, or farm. How far it was away could not be ascertained — not that it mattered.

Biggles walked a little way out into the field and tested the surface with the heel of his shoe. 'Nice and hard,' he remarked. 'I was afraid the rain might have made it soft.'

'Where are we going to wait?' asked Ginger.

'It doesn't really matter,' answered Biggles. 'We should hear the

machine long before it gets here. That's the direction it should come from —

unless it has run into trouble on the way' He pointed to the west.

'There's nothing much we can do until it comes, so we might as well take a stroll round the hedge.'

They walked for some way, but, seeing nothing of interest, decided to sit down to wait.

'There is this about it; everything is nice and quiet,' observed Ginger.

'I was a bit worried when I heard that bloke tell von Stalhein that he was having all possible landing-grounds watched. I was afraid they might have included this one.'

'I didn't overlook that,' returned Biggles. 'The same conditions apply as to Smith's shop.'

There's no telling how much Intelligence people do know, until a situation like this arises to force them to show their hand. They don't seem to have got this place on their list, anyway.'

Hardly had the words left his lips when a motor vehicle of some sort could be heard coming down the road at high speed. Presently its headlights made the trees that occurred at intervals along the hedge stand out like pieces of stage scenery. There was of course no reason to suppose that the car was in any way concerned with them. Indeed, it did not occur to Ginger that this might be the case until it stopped at the gate by which they themselves had entered the field. There was then a good deal of noise, talking, and doors slamming, as if several men were involved. Lights appeared, and against them vague shadows.

Ginger glanced at Biggles in dismay.

'I spoke too soon,' said Biggles lugubriously. 'Smith told us that he has used this field before. Somehow the police must have got wind of it.'

'That's what usually happens, sooner or later.'

'What are we going to do about it?' demanded Ginger.

'If Algy comes, and we signal to him to keep clear, the light will be seen and we shall almost certainly be caught,' answered Biggles. 'Let's wait to see what goes on before we get into a flap.'

'I can see four men,' said Ginger.

'One will have stayed with the car, no doubt. Call it five.' 'What are they doing?'

Two men had remained near the gate. A brittle sound, as of wood striking wood, came through the night air. The other two men began walking across the stubble, slowly, appearing to carry something between them.

'They are trapping the field,' observed Biggles.

'You mean, they're running a wire across it?'

'Yes, about a couple of feet from the ground. The trick is as old as war flying. Any machine trying to land in such a trap is bound to trip up and somersault.'

'Then that settles it,' said Ginger emphatically. 'We can't let Algy land.'

'Don't be in a hurry.' Biggles looked at his watch. 'We've still a quarter of an hour to go. I have a file up my sleeve, don't forget. It was intended for iron bars, so it should have no difficulty in cutting through soft wire.'

'If we try walking across the field we shall be spotted instantly.'

'Certainly we would, if we walked out from here. We'll work from the other side. But before we move we'll wait and see how these smart-alsicks finally dispose themselves.'

The operation of trapping a landing-ground, which consists merely of stretching a taut wire across it, does not take long; and presently, after driving in a stake somewhere out of sight, the two men who had gone out into the field were observed returning. The lights of the car were dowsed.

'They're all going to wait together by the gate,' said Biggles. 'That's what I thought they'd do. They suppose they will see everything from there. Come on.' He got up and began walking briskly along the hedge away from the gate. Against the dark background there was no risk of being seen.

At a distance of perhaps a hundred yards the hedge ran into another, running at right-angles to it. Biggles turned to the left and continued on until the original hedge — the one which held the gate opening into the road — merged into the gloom. Then he struck off across the field.

'If we can find the wire and cut it I shall bring Algy down,' he told Ginger in a whisper. '

If we fail we shall have to send the danger signal. If he does come down things are likely to be a bit brisk until we get on board. The blokes at the gate won't move at once. They'll wait for the crash. When there's no crash they'll come out to see why.'

'They'll see your torch signalling to Algy.'

'Of course they will. That can't be avoided. It will probably make them smile, knowing that the field has been wired. Watch out, we're likely to walk into it at any moment now.'

A minute later Ginger felt the wire against his legs. 'Here it is,' he whispered. At the same moment, from somewhere afar off, came the drone of an aero engine.

'Help me to hold this wire steady,' ordered Biggles.

Ginger gripped the wire with both hands near the point at which Biggles'

file was already biting into the metal. Two sounds only could be heard.

One was the rasp of the file; the other was the murmur of a gliding aircraft.

'This is where we have to burn our boats,' decided Biggles. 'Flash the call sign.' He handed Ginger the torch and went on with his work.

The torch, upturned, cut a series of dots and dashes in the night.

'Nearly through,' muttered Biggles. 'Keep flashing till you get an answer.'

Rasp-rasp-rasp, grated the file.

'Okay. They've seen us,' informed Ginger.

Biggles raised a leg, put his foot on the wire, and jumped. The wire parted with a musical twang. At once Biggles snatched up the loose end and began running with it, to get as much of it as possible out of the way.

Ginger's eyes were on the gate — or the position where he knew it to be.

There was no sound or sign of movement. Raising the torch again, he flashed it to show their position to the pilot, now circling overhead.

Biggles came back. 'That's all we can do,' he said. 'Watch the gate and tell me if you see '

em coming.' He took the torch and held it low to form a narrow flare path.

For the next sixty seconds, time, to Ginger, seemed to stand still. As Biggles had said, there was nothing more they could do. So there they stood, nerves tense, eyes staring into the dark vault overhead.

'He's a long time, what's he doing?' muttered Ginger impatiently.

'He's trying to avoid collision with something solid,' answered Biggles.

'Quite right. This isn't the moment to make a boob. Here he comes. Watch out he doesn't knock you down!'

The black silhouette of the aircraft suddenly appeared, hardening as it drew nearer. The wheels bumped, bumped again, and the machine ran to a stand-still. Ginger recognised the Proctor. It had overshot them a little way, but they ran on after it, and reached it just as the door was opened.

Bertie stepped out. 'What cheer, chaps!' he greeted. 'Where's this bally Iron Curtain I've heard so much about?'

'It's right here,' Biggles told him curtly. 'Get back in and cut the funny stuff. I'm in no mood for it. In you go, Ginger.'

Bertie returned to his seat. Ginger scrambled in behind him. Biggles followed and slammed the door. 'Peel off, Algy,' he snapped. 'There's no future in staying here.'

As he finished speaking several things happened at once. The engine roared. The Proctor began to move. A searchlight cut a blaze of white light across the stubble. A machine-gun started its vicious rattle, the bullets flicking dirt and scraps of straw into the air.

For a few seconds Algy held the machine low, for speed, banking with one wing-tip nearly touching the ground. Then the Proctor zoomed like a rocket, and the field, with its dangers, faded astern.

'Which way do you want to go?' called Algy.

'Grab some altitude while I think about it,' replied Biggles. The Proctor continued to climb steeply.

After a minute Biggles went on. 'Make for the nearest German frontier. A course slightly south of east should take us to the American Zone.

That'll suit me — for a start, anyway.

The thing is to get outside the Curtain.'

'I'll do my best,' promised Algy.

'Do you expect any difficulty?'

'We were challenged on the way out.'

'By what?'

'Flak, when I refused to go down. Radar must have picked us up as we crossed the frontier. I saw a Russian Yak, but I dropped into a cloud and lost it.'

'Did you come across the Russian Zone?'

'Naturally, I came the shortest way.'

'That explains why they were trapping the known landing-grounds on your line of flight.

No matter. Carry on. You've less than a hundred miles to go.'

Bertie chipped in. 'By the way, where's our soldier chappie, Ross?'

'On his way to China, via Berlin. They're using these fellows in the Korean war.'

'Here, I say! That's a bit tough!' muttered Bertie. 'Looks as if he's had it. How far is China from here? Never was any bally good at geography, and all that sort of thing.'

'For a rough guess,' answered Biggles grimly, 'China is about five thousand miles farther east than we could get in this kite, even with full tanks. That's why I'm going the other way.'

'But, look here, old boy, you're not going to leave Ross there, are you?'

'I am not,' Biggles told him shortly. 'But I'm not such a fool as to try to fly right across Russia. We'll get something bigger than this and tackle the job from the back door of Asia. But it may not come to that.'

At the moment Ross is in the Soviet Zone of Berlin.'

'Are you thinking of trying to collect him there?' asked Algy.

'It'd save us a much longer journey if we could. It would also save a lot of time. I wouldn't

like Ross to think we'd let him down. Get across the frontier, and we'll talk about it.'

The Proctor droned on.

Algy's fears of interception did not materialise, due perhaps to a new front of cloud that was coming up from the west, in which he took cover.

Signals ordering the machine down were received on the radio, but these were of course ignored. There was a flurry of flak as the aircraft approached the frontier, but it never threatened serious danger.

An hour later the Proctor landed, and, after explanations, parked for the night at Frankfurt, in the American Zone of Occupied Germany.

Much later in the day, just as the twilight was becoming dim, it touched its wheels on the great international airport at Berlin.

CHAPTER IX

Biggles Takes a Chance

The weather seemed determined to remain unsettled, and it was raining quietly but steadily when Biggles stepped out of a taxi in a certain street in the British Zone of Berlin. After paying his driver, he crossed the shining pavement and entered an open door over which hung a limp Union Jack.

A sergeant in British battle-dress intercepted him. 'Yes, sir?' he challenged.

'I want to speak to Major Boyd,' Biggles told him.

'Got an appointment, sir?'

'No, but if you take in my name I think he'll see me. Just say it's Inspector Bigglesworth.'

'Very good, sir. Please wait. here.' The N.C.O. strode down a corridor and knocked on a door at the far end. He went in, but reappeared at once with a finger raised. 'This way, sir.'

Biggles walked forward and entered the room. The N.C.O. retired and closed the door behind him.

An elderly man in civilian clothes, who had been seated at a desk, rose to meet Biggles. '

Come in,' he invited. 'Take a seat. What can I do for you?'

'You were expecting me, I think?'

'Yes. I had a signal from London.'

'That would be the result of a phone call I put through to my chief this afternoon. He told me to come to you.'

'What's the trouble?'

'It isn't exactly trouble. One of our operatives is a prisoner in the Soviet Zone. I'm anxious to get him out, or at any rate make contact with him.'

'Can't he get out on his own?'

'He may not try. He's an amateur, a volunteer, in a rather curious business. He doesn't know it, but as far as I'm concerned his work is finished. Through him I've got the information I wanted, so he might as well come home. It's unlikely that he could get out even if he tried. Not knowing what I know, it's more likely that he won't try. Unless I can get hold of him quickly, I may lose sight of him for good.'

'I see. How can I help you?'

'I don't know my way about. That is, I'm not familiar with the Zonal boundaries. I want you to lend me a guide who does. There are reasons why I'd rather not risk being questioned at any of the control points — our own, or Russian.'

'Where exactly do you want to go?'

'I've reason to think that my man is in the Hotel Prinz Karl, in the Zindenplatzer.'

'It shouldn't be very difficult to get you there. When do you want to go?'

'Now, if it's all the same to you?'

'It's all the same to me. D'you want the guide to wait for you and bring

you out?'

Biggles hesitated. 'That's a bit difficult. I've no idea how long I shall be. How long could the guide wait?'

'As long as you like, within reason.'

'Suppose he waits for an hour? That should be long enough. If I'm not ready to leave by then I may be over the other side indefinitely.'

The officer pushed a bell. 'Suppose you get into trouble? Do you want me to do anything about it?'

'No, thanks. It's unlikely that you would be able to do anything, short of starting a full-scale diplomatic row. If our friends over the way get their hands on me, knowing who I am, they'll keep me there.'

'Watch how you go.'

'I'll do that.'

A man came in, a youngish man in a well-worn suit. There were no introductions, but a glance told Biggles that he was a German. This was confirmed when Major Boyd spoke to him in that language, explaining what was required of him. The guide simply said, 'Jawohi,' and went out, to return a minute later wearing a hat and raincoat. 'I am ready,' he announced, looking at Biggles.

'Thanks, Boyd, much obliged,' said Biggles, and got up.

'No trouble at all. Good luck.'

'Do you want to see me when I come back?'

'Not necessarily. I shall probably have left the office by then. The guide will come back here.'

'Fair enough. Goodbye.' Biggles followed the German into the street.

The man set off at a brisk pace. Not a word was spoken in the long walk that followed.

At first the way lay through busy thoroughfares, but presently these gave way to quiet streets in what was obviously a residential quarter. In one of these the guide turned abruptly into a private house, one of a long row built in the same pattern. Three steps led from the pavement to the door. This the guide unlocked with a key which he took from his pocket.

They entered. The door was closed. All was in darkness, but the guide switched on a torch, to reveal a long hall. To the far end of this he walked. Another door was opened, and another hall traversed. Yet another door gave access to a street much like the one they had just left. But there was a difference. The soldiers now encountered wore Russian uniforms, not British. The guide walked on, in an atmosphere that had suddenly become sinister. There was no need for him to tell Biggles that they were in the Russian Zone.

Ten minutes brought them to an important street of shops and bright lights. There was a fair amount of traffic. The guide stopped at a corner and spoke for the first time. The hotel is about a hundred paces along, on the right. It is the only one, so you cannot make a mistake. A few doors along from here there is a bierhaus. I will wait for you there.'

'If I'm not back in an hour, you'd better go home,' said Biggles. 'As you wish.'

Biggles went on alone and had no difficulty in finding the hotel. It was larger, and of much higher class than had been the one in Prague. The clientele was altogether different and, Biggles noticed, included a fair sprinkling of Russian officers. Several cars stood outside. There was also a patrol vehicle of the jeep type, with two soldiers standing by it.

Just how he was going to locate Ross, Biggles did not know. Apart from the name of the hotel he had no information on which to work. He had a vague hope that he might see him, or his escort, passing through the vestibule or in one of the public rooms. If these failed, he decided, he would try his luck with the reception clerk, trusting to his spotted tie to produce answers to his questions. There was, of course, no certainty that it would; but it had worked in Paris and in Prague, so it might work in Berlin.

He had no other plan, for which reason he had told the guide not to wait more than an hour. He himself was prepared to stay there all night, and all the next day, if necessary.

It was obviously not much use standing outside, so he went in through big revolving doors to find himself in a reception hall of some size, furnished with the customary appointments. The office, with its counter and rack of keys, was at the far end near the foot of a broad flight of stairs. Near it was a cloakroom. On either side were doors, one leading into a lounge and the other to the dining-room. Near the door of the lounge, a lift was operated by a uniformed attendant. The usual chairs and settees, with occasional tables near them, were arranged round the walls to leave an open space in the centre.

Sitting about were, perhaps, a dozen men, alone or in pairs, some talking, others reading newspapers. So much Biggles took in at a glance.

He walked over to a settee near the lift, intending to sit and watch it for a while. It was occupied by one man, who sat at one end half hidden by a newspaper in which he appeared to be engrossed. Tobacco smoke spiralled up from behind the printed pages.

Paying no attention to him, Biggles sat down in a position from which he could keep an eye on the stairs, the lift, the lounge and the dining-room.

He was feeling for his cigarette case when his companion on the settee lowered his newspaper. His attention being elsewhere, he did not notice this until a voice spoke. He paused imperceptibly in the act of taking a cigarette from his case. Then he turned his head, to meet the

sardonic eyes of Erich von Stalhein.

'Good evening, Bigglesworth. I was hoping you'd look in.'

Biggles finished lighting his cigarette before he answered. He needed a moment to recover. 'It was nice of you to come along,' he replied. 'Dear me! How you do get about.'

'You're quite a traveller yourself, you know,' came back von Stalhein suavely. 'On this occasion, however, I fear you have given yourself a fruitless journey. You were, I presume, looking for a young man named Ross?'

'What gave you that idea?' questioned Biggles.

'Call it instinct,' answered von Stalhein, smiling. 'It pains me to disappoint you, but I'm afraid you won't find Ross here.'

'No?'

'No. He left here about an hour ago. By now he should be many miles from Berlin.'

Biggles' eyes searched the face of his old enemy, and he decided that he was telling the truth, for the simple reason that there was no need for him to lie. Had Ross still been in the hotel von Stalhein could have said so without risk of losing him.

'I'm sorry about that,' said Biggles evenly. 'Still, it was worth coming here if only to have a word with you. We so seldom have time to compare notes.'

'Surely that's your fault,' protested von Stalhein. 'I wonder you don't exhaust yourself rushing about the world as you do.'

'I like rushing about,' asserted Biggles, who was thinking fast. 'It keeps me alive.'

'One day it will defeat that object,' said von Stalhein gravely. 'Indeed, it may have already done so. By the way, Bigglesworth, you have disappointed me.'

'I'm sorry about that. In what way?'

'I always understood that in your country it is considered bad form to wear a club or regimental tie to which one is not entitled.'

Biggles fingered his tie, laughing softly. 'Yours looked so attractive that I succumbed to temptation. I knew, I must admit, that it was rather

— er — exclusive.' He became serious. 'Tell me, why did you decide to join a club, an organisation, which at one time I am sure you would have regarded with abhorrence?'

Von Stalhein sighed. 'We are not always masters of our destiny'

'That's where you're wrong,' argued Biggles. 'You could be yourself if you could get that grievance bug out of your brain. Do you think you are helping Germany by what you are doing?'

Von Stalhein stiffened. 'That's my business.'

'It seems a pity,' murmured Biggles. 'One day we must go into it, and I guarantee to convince you that tea tastes better on my side of the fence.'

'I can't stop now. Don't forget I have to find Ross.'

'You will have to go a long, long way.'

'That will be nothing new to me,' averred Biggles. Actually, he hardly knew what he was saying, for his brain was occupied with something

very different. He had been playing for time, and so, for some reason not apparent, had von Stalhein.

BIGGLES FOLLOWS ON



'I shall have to be going. Here's your paper.'

Biggles had been watching the movements of the lift attendant who, from time to time, when his services were not required, did odd jobs, such as folding newspapers thrown down carelessly. He now began to empty the ashtrays on nearby tables into a bowl which he kept handy for the purpose. Biggles had not failed to notice, too, that von Stalhein's eyes went constantly to the main entrance, as if he was

expecting someone.

When, through the revolving doors, marched a Russian patrol, he understood.

'Well, think over what I've said,' murmured Biggles, reaching casually for the newspaper that lay between them. 'I shall have to be going.

Here's your paper.' He flicked the journal into von Stalhein's face and in the same movement vaulted over the back of the settee. Two steps took him to the lift. He slammed the gate and pressed the first button that his finger found. Von Stalhein had moved almost as quickly, but he was a fraction of a second too late. The lift shot upwards.

Biggles counted the floors as they flashed past. The lift stopped at the third. He stepped out. A long, carpeted corridor ran to left and right.

To the right, a man in a dressing-gown, towels over his arm, was crossing the passage, apparently going to a bathroom. Biggles walked along, his eyes on the door of the vacated room. It stood ajar.

Just inside was a hat and coat stand. Several garments hung on it. They included a Russian officer's cap and greatcoat.

He lifted them off and strode on to the end of the corridor. Another passage ran at right-angles. Half-way down it a red light glowed. Putting on the cap and coat as he walked he went on to it and found, as he expected, a door under the red light marked 'Fire Exit.'

Opening the door he saw a narrow stone stairway spiralling downwards. He went down.

The stairway, he knew, was bound to end at the ground floor. It did, in a stone passage with doors on either side, from behind which came the rattle of crockery. A man, white clad, wearing a chef's tall hat, came out of one of the doors, singing to himself. He looked at Biggles curiously, but said nothing.

'I've lost my way,' said Biggles apologetically. 'Where is the nearest exit?'

The man pointed. 'It is the staff entrance,' he explained. Danke,' thanked Biggles, and strolled on to the door.

It opened into a dingy little side street. As he stepped out he heard whistles blowing and orders being shouted. Two soldiers came running round the corner. Biggles, already walking towards them, continued to do so, not daring to turn. The men steadied their pace as they passed him, saluting. Biggles returned their salute and went on without a backward glance.

Presently, to his chagrin, he found himself in the Zindenplatzer, with the main hotel entrance twenty yards to his right. Von Stalhein was standing on the steps, gesticulating as he spoke to several uniformed men. Biggles turned the other way. He would have done so in any case, as it was the direction of the corner where he had left his guide. He found the entrance to the bierhaus and, turning in, saw his man sitting alone at a small table with a glass

of beer in front of him. There were several other men there, mostly soldiers, but their attention was on a girl at the end of the room, singing at a piano.

Biggles touched his guide on the arm. At first he was not recognised, and the man started guiltily. But when recognition came the man moved in such haste that he nearly knocked his beer over.

'Let's get along,' said Biggles quietly. 'I'm afraid I've started something at the hotel.'

The man needed no persuasion. It was clear that he did not want to be involved. Without a word he went out into the street and hurried along, with Biggles beside him, until they came to a less frequented street, into which they turned. Several cars, travelling at high speed, overtook them, but none stopped. Once they met a police patrol on foot. The leader saluted. Biggles acknowledged.

More narrow streets and the guide turned into an iron gate Biggles recognised it as the one by which they had entered the Soviet Zone. There were, he suspected, from the length of the halls, two houses,

built back-to-back. Through them they reached the British Zone.

'Take off those clothes,' said the guide in an agitated voice. 'We may meet a British patrol. Without giving you a chance to prove who you are they may hurry you back into the Soviet Zone. Russians may be watching, too. We are still too close to be safe.'

Biggles lost no time in divesting himself of his borrowed uniform.

Presently he threw the cap and coat over the parapet of a bridge into a river. 'They should start a pretty little mystery when they're found,' he remarked.

'Forget everything that has happened,' advised the guide as he went on.

'That won't be easy, but I'll try,' agreed Biggles. 'I had an awkward five minutes. An old friend was waiting for me in the hotel. I had to leave somewhat hurriedly.'

'It often happens that way,' said the guide simply.

A cruising taxi came along. Biggles stopped it. Five minutes later he dropped his companion at the house where he had picked him up. He did not go in.

'Give my compliments to Major Boyd and tell him everything went off all right,'

requested Biggles. 'Goodnight, and many thanks.'

Under his direction the taxi then went on to the Airport Hotel where he, and the others, had found accommodation.

'Well, how did you get on?' greeted Algy, when he walked in. 'You

didn't get Ross?'

Biggles dropped wearily into a chair. 'No. Von Stalhein was there, waiting. Shook me, I don't mind telling you. My own fault. I should have reckoned on the possibility. He knows I'm after Ross. Naturally, he made things a bit difficult — or would have done, given the chance. Either his plans went wrong or else I arrived a bit too soon for him.

Push the bell. I could do with a drink.'

'What about Ross?'

'He's gone.'

'He wasn't in Berlin very long.'

'No, and I can guess why. Once von Stalhein realised I was after him he'd get him out of reach — as he thinks — as quickly as possible.'

'And now what?'

'It looks as if we shall have to go East, after all. We took a chance on coming here. It didn't work, that's all. Oh, well! I'm tired. Walking never did agree with me.'

'When are we pulling out of here?'

'Right away, before von Stalhein can organise any unpleasantness. You can fly me home. I'll snatch some sleep on the way. Don't forget we've got to cross the Russian Zone to get out. Maybe I'm getting nervous, but it would be like von Stalhein to put some Yaks in the air with orders to find a Proctor. Get the machine laid on, one of you, and we'll go home.'

CHAPTER X

The Air Commodore

is Worried

The following afternoon found Biggles in Air Commodore Raymond's office, standing in front of the huge wall map of the world, narrating the events of the previous forty-eight hours, the strain of which was beginning to show on his face. He was, in fact, tired, and as a result of this his manner was inclined to be brusque. Present also at the conference was Major Charles, of the Intelligence Service, and a senior official of the Foreign Office. Their attendance had been requested by the Air Commodore, who thought they ought to hear what Biggles had to say.

'It all boils down to this,' stated Biggles, who had run over the main features of the affair.

'Our operation, from the military or political aspect, was successful in that we have good reason to think we know why these wretched soldiers were induced to desert. The scheme is not confined to Britain. I spoke to Marcel Brissac on the way home, and he has ascertained that there have been a

series of desertions from the French Army, too. No doubt a check-up would reveal that the same thing has been going on in all the military forces of all the United Nations. It is a dirty business, but there it is. After all, if top scientists and government officials can be persuaded to turn traitor, there is nothing surprising in the fact that soldiers, mostly men of lower education, have been induced to do the same thing.'

'These propaganda broadcasts may sound silly to people of intelligence, but they are a menace,' declared Major Charles. 'We knew the general direction from which these Far Eastern broadcasts were coming, but we haven't been able to locate the actual site of the station. It is, presumably, a new one. The general trend of the broadcasts is an appeal to the United Nations Forces to stop fighting

— to refrain from killing innocent people, as they so nicely put it. We shall have to try to put an end to it.'

'Aside from the broad official aspect of the thing I have a personal interest in the matter,'

resumed Biggles. 'Indeed, I should say a moral obligation. For the original deserters I have very little sympathy; no doubt they are feeling pretty sick with themselves; but I was instrumental in getting Guardsman Ross into the miserable position in which he now finds himself. I told him that, whatever happened, I'd get him out. The fact that he did a good job, all that was asked of him, makes it all the more imperative that we should not let him down. That the trail leads to the far side of the world, instead of being confined to Europe as was supposed, makes no difference. Had it been humanly possible I would have gone straight on after him; but it would have been worse than futile to try to cross the U.S.S.R. and China with such equipment as I had available. That's why I came home.

What I want now is authority to make my own plans to collect Ross and bring him back here.'

There was silence for a moment. The Air Commodore looked doubtful. 'Such an operation would be in the nature of a forlorn hope.'

'You can call it what you like,' returned Biggles. 'The fact remains.'

'Just a minute,' put in Major Charles. 'Let us get the thing in perspective. It seems to me that we have here two objectives. One is the silencing of this radio station. The other is the rescue of an operative who has become involved. From the national angle the first is by far the most important.'

'From my angle, the second is the vital one,' said Biggles shortly.

'The first question to be decided,' went on Major Charles imperturbably,

'is whether to treat each operation separately, or combine them and

deal with them as one?'

The representative of the Foreign Office joined in the argument, addressing himself to Major Charles. 'When you talk about silencing this station, what exactly have you in mind? You will not, I hope, overlook the fact that we are not at war with Manchuria?'

'I trust you're not going to quibble about that?' interposed Biggles trenchantly. 'Any place that is used as a base by the enemies of this country is at war with us as far as I'm concerned. If Manchuria set up a bleat, you could ask them what they're doing with our men.'

The Air Commodore forced a tolerant smile. 'All right. Let us stick to the point. We are agreed that we have two objectives before us. The question is: are they to be tackled together or separately?'

'That's not for me to answer,' said Biggles. 'My main concern is Ross.'

'What about the other fellows in the camp, if they should want to come home?' queried Major Charles. 'Are you going to bring Ross home alone, or will you give them all a chance to get out?'

'That will depend on how many there are of them,' contended Biggles.

'There would be a limit to what I could take. I certainly wouldn't try to persuade these men to come, if they don't want to. If they like Communism, they can have it — until the time comes when they wish they'd never heard of it.'

The Air Commodore resumed. 'Very well, Bigglesworth. Let us take your angle first.

You want to fetch Ross home?'

'Yes.'

'How would you go about it, bearing in mind that we know nothing

about this place Kratsen?'

'I should start by finding out something about it, by air photography, if nothing else. In broad terms, as Kratsen is practically on the coast according to the map, I should take out a marine aircraft, basing it in Japanese or South Korean waters. The business of making contact with Ross would depend on how much I could learn about the place. I might put someone in to get the layout of the camp.'

'Only a Chinese could do that.'

'I realise it. I have one in mind.'

The Air Commodore's eyebrows went up. 'You know a Chinese who would do that?'

'I think so. You will remember Doctor Wung Ling? I flew him out to China not so long ago to salvage his father's treasure chest.¹ When we parted he assured me that if at any time I needed his help he was at my service.

That wasn't idle talk, either.'

'Go on.'

'That's all. Having got the necessary gear on the set-up, I should choose my time to go ashore and collect Ross.'

'You make it sound all very simple.'

'There's no sense in stock-piling difficulties before they arise. If I did that I'd never do anything. The longer you look at a mountain the bigger it looks.'

'Very well. Let's say you find Ross. What about the other fellows?'

'I've said that would depend on the number. If there were a lot I couldn't cram them into an aircraft. There are Commandos in Korea.

They've made several raids. That means they have landing craft. They might co-operate by standing by to pick up extras.'

'That means bringing the army into it,' protested the Foreign Office man.

'If there was fighting there would be casualties. Our troops would be recognised. What excuse would we have for landing on neutral territory?'

'Excuse!' breathed Biggles. 'Stiffen the crow's! Has it come to this, that we have to have an excuse for getting a British soldier out of a foreign jail? This talk of excuses binds me rigid. All right. Have it your own way. We'll be civilians. If I decide I need more men I know one who'll come with me. He's an old hand at the game. Believe you me, by the time he's finished with it there won't be much left of this lying propaganda dump.'

The Air Commodore's eyes went to Biggles' face. 'Who are you thinking of?'

'Gimlet King.'

'I thought so.'

'He'll knock off hunting foxes for a while when I tell him what's cooking. He and that crazy gang of his should be useful. They're all civilians now.'

'It isn't quite regular,' objected the Foreign Office man anxiously.

'Regular! Suffering Icarus! What has regularity got to do with it? The trouble with us is, we're a thundering sight too regular. All we get for that is a kick in the pants. Don't talk to me about regulations!'

'We don't want to start a war with China.'

'Listen,' said Biggles, speaking distinctly. 'When I was a kid I hated war. And I haven't changed. But how have I spent most of my life? In wars, big and small. Why? I'll tell you. Because, instead of settling down to a quiet life as I intended I've been pitchforked into wars started by other people who have never been in a battle in their lives.'

I'm not starting anything. The other side has already done that. No doubt there are people who would like the police to pack up for fear of starting a war with the crooks, spivs and chisellers, who thrive like a lot of maggots on decent folk.'

'Steady. Take it easy, Bigglesworth,' adjured the Air Commodore. 'There's no need to get worked up about it.'

'Sorry, chief, but this sort of argument makes me tired,' muttered Biggles. 'Two nights ago I was sliding down a greasy roof in Prague. Last night I was dodging about in the Soviet Sector of Berlin. D'you suppose I do this sort of thing for fun? When I scrape home by the skin of my shins, what do I hear but talk of excuses and regulations? Now let's get down to brass tacks. Do I go and fetch Ross or do I not? Say "No" to that and my resignation will be on your desk in five minutes. Then I'll buy an aircraft and do the job on my own account. Afterwards I'll settle down to grow mushrooms, or tomatoes or something.'

'I don't see why you shouldn't go to fetch Ross,' said the Air Commodore awkwardly. '

But you must realise that what we are proposing is a very serious business.'

'Are you telling me? I'm the one it will be serious for if things go wrong. You gentlemen may lose your jobs. I shall lose everything from my neck up. I'm going to fetch Ross. I told him I would and no one is going to stop me. If the government wants the lid putting over the big mouth of the propaganda works at Kratsen I'll do it at the same time, if it's possible.'

The Air Commodore looked round. 'I'll take responsibility for my Department,' he said quietly. 'What about you? You need know nothing about it if you feel that it may involve you in trouble.'

Major Charles nodded. 'I have an interest in the affair,' said he. 'Go ahead.'

The Foreign Office official shrugged. 'I can't sanction the raid, of course; but I can shut my eyes.'

The Air Commodore turned back to Biggles. 'There's your answer,' he said.

'Make your own arrangements. I'll do my best to get you anything you think you're likely to want.'

'You've no objection to me bringing in Gimlet King?'

'None at all. You'd better keep quiet about that, though. Let me know when you're ready to move off'

'I'll do that,' promised Biggles, and left the room.

He walked back to his office where the others were awaiting the result of the conference.

'Okay,' he said. 'We're going to fetch Ross. Ginger, get Gimlet King on the phone for me.'

If he isn't at home, you'll probably find him at the Ritz.'

Algy's eyes opened wide. 'Is he coming with us?'

'I hope so.'

Bertie whistled. 'My word! This is going to be a jolly little frolic,' he murmured.

CHAPTER XI

Wung Ling Reconnoitres

Ginger lay flat on his stomach and stared into a tenuous mist that was beginning to rise from the salt-marsh that spread away in front of him for as far as his probing eyes could reach. A crescent moon hung low in the heavens, turning the mist into a semi-transparent film that made it impossible to judge distances. Nothing was distinct. All that could really be seen clearly was the tops of coarse grasses that made a fringe at right-angles to his body. To left and right the scene was much the same, except in a few places where the dunes that lined the Manchurian foreshore of the Yellow Sea broke into gentle undulations. From behind came the gentle lapping of tiny waves expiring on a broad, sandy beach, that swung round on either hand in a vast curve that ultimately lost itself in the gloom of distances unknown.

Beside him, in a similar position, lay a figure of about his own build, chin on hand, also gazing fixedly into the same vague landscape. This was

'Cub' Peters, ex-commando, and junior member of the famous war-time troop known as King's Kittens.

For a long while neither had spoken. Apart from the fretting of the sea upon the beach the only sound that broke the eerie silence was the occasional melancholy call of a sea-fowl.

Ginger looked at his watch. 'He should be here by now,' he whispered.

'I hope he hasn't lost his direction in this confounded fog,' answered Cub. 'It's easily done.'

'He's got a compass.'

'Then he should be all right.'

Ginger moved his position slightly to relieve limbs that were

becoming cramped on ground which, being damp, struck chill. Then, without relaxing his vigilance, he allowed his mind to wander back over the events of the past month.

The first week of it had been spent in making preparations for a mission which, on account of its probable long duration, required extra careful planning. In this period Biggles had made contact with Captain 'Gimlet'

King, war-time specialist in delicate operations in enemy territory. The Manchurian proposition had been put to him and he had accepted it with alacrity. He, in turn, had got in touch with 'Copper' Colson, 'Trapper'

Troublay, and 'Cub' Peters, of his old troop, who had welcomed the invitation that promised more adventure than was available in civil life.

Biggles had been right in his estimation of Wung Ling. The young Chinese doctor, when the scheme was explained to him, had at once dropped what he was doing in order to take advantage of an opportunity of striking back at a regime that had destroyed not only his own ancestral home, but the ancient culture of his native land.

The aircraft chosen for the enterprise was a Scorpion flying-boat, originally a military development of the Sunderland, designed for long-distance work, but later modified for civil transportation. It had not gone into production, but the prototype had for some years been on the establishment of a Royal Air Force Communication Squadron. In fact, it still was; but it happened to be one of the aircraft that had been made available under a reciprocal arrangement between the Air Ministry and the Air Police. Powered with four Bristol

'Hercules' engines, it had accommodation for sixteen passengers.

A fortnight had been spent on the journey to the Far East, for, as Biggles pointed out, there was no particular hurry. He did not know how long it would take Ross to get to his ultimate station at Kratsen and he did not want to arrive too soon. It had been decided to use South Korea as a base, this being nearer than Japan to the objective,

and a mooring had been arranged at the international marine aircraft establishment of Kungching, where servicing facilities were available. There was also an R.A.F. maintenance unit, under the command of a Group Captain, who acted as Liaison Officer with the American Forces of the United Nations. So far the operation had been merely a matter of routine.

On arrival, Biggles' first step had been to present himself; and a letter of introduction that he carried, to the R.A.F. officer in charge. Asked if there was anything he needed, he said all that he required for the moment, apart from fuel, was a set of air photographs of the Kratsen area. Such photographs, he explained, were essential for the job on which he was engaged, but he was reluctant to show the big flying-boat over the objective. Apart from the obvious risk of having it shot down or damaged by enemy fighters, he was anxious to avoid doing anything that might give the broadcasting station reason to suppose that it was under observation.

It turned out that no photographs of that particular area were available.

However, the Group Captain said he would see what he could do about it.

That he wasted no time was evident when, twenty-four hours later, he presented Biggles with a beautiful set of pictures, both vertical and oblique, that had been taken at his request by an American photographic reconnaissance unit.

With these on the table in the cabin of the Scorpion the next phase had been planned. The photographs showed that wealth of detail for which modern photography is remarkable, but the most vital factors still remained an unknown quantity. The pylons, three of them, were plain to see from the shadows they cast; but among the several buildings which the pictures revealed, it was not possible to determine which one held the prisoners. For that the deserting soldiers would be treated as prisoners Biggles did not doubt. More information on this aspect was required before a raid could be made with any sort of confidence. This difficulty had been foreseen, and accounted for the presence of Wung Ling in the party.

He was now called upon to assume the role for which, by reason of his nationality, he was ideally adapted. Ginger had rather wondered how the Chinaman would feel when confronted by the cold, hard facts of reality; but he need not have worried. Wung Ling, like most of his countrymen, was not demonstrative, but it was clear that he was deriving no small satisfaction from this opportunity of hitting back at the people who had robbed him of all he possessed.

There were, Biggles explained, two ways of 'putting him in.' He could either be landed on the coast, a matter of some four miles from the actual objective, under cover of darkness, or he could be parachuted in.

Wung Ling elected to use the parachute method, explaining, naïvely, that he had always wanted to experience the sensation of a parachute jump.

This suited Biggles, as the drop could be made from a small machine, which again would save the flying-boat a journey into dangerous waters.

One trip it would have to make before the final raid, and that would be to pick up Wung (as they now called him) at the end of his reconnaissance. There could be no question, Biggles declared, of putting down a land machine, in the dark, on ground which, from the photographs, appeared to be mostly bog or paddy-fields — either of which would probably throw the machine on its nose.

It was decided that Wung should have three days in which to gather the information required. That is to say, the flying-boat would stand by, at a spot on the coast to be selected from the photographs, at midnight, on the third night after he had parachuted in.

This, it was thought, would give him ample time to get the particulars that were wanted.

There was practically no limit to these, stated Biggles. Every scrap of information that could be gathered would be useful. Most important of all was the location and construction of the prisoners' sleeping quarters; the number of men occupying them; their routine, and the position, number and nationality, of sentries guarding them. Also, the

number of troops at the station.

Wung said gravely that he would find out about these things, and it was arranged that he should be put in that night, as the weather was favourable and nothing was to be gained by waiting. He went ashore with Biggles to acquire a suitable outfit from the Korean refugees, whose crowded camps could be seen outside the town. Biggles, on his part, went to the R.A.F. Liaison Officer to arrange for the loan of a small aircraft suitable for the sortie. He had brought a parachute with him.

The flight was made as scheduled. Biggles flew the machine, and gliding at a great height unloaded his passenger between the coastline, plainly seen in the moonlight, and the cluster of lights that marked the position of the radio station. The last he saw of Wung was a fast-diminishing black dot below him. He continued his glide until he was far out to sea before opening up and returned to base without incident.

The three days had now expired, and the next step in the programme, the operation of picking up Wung, was now in progress. Five members only of the party were briefed for it, as no more were required. Biggles, with Algy as reserve pilot, flew the Scorpion. From it a rubber dinghy was launched, putting ashore Bertie, whose duty it was to stand by it, and Ginger, who with Cub for company, had advanced to the top of the dunes in order to keep watch for Wung, in case he should fail to strike the exact spot where the dinghy was waiting. They would also be in a position to help him should he arrive hard pressed, which was unlikely, but possible.

Ginger and Cub waited, watching, straining their eyes to pick out tangible objects in the miasma.

The hour appointed for the rendezvous had passed by fifteen minutes, and Ginger was just becoming alarmed, when a single, ghost-like figure loomed up with startling suddenness in the mist, proving how deceptive it was.

Making no sound, he watched it advance slowly towards the beach until recognition became possible. A low signal whistle, prearranged, brought an answer, and Wung made his way wearily to him.

'Excuse me, please, for being late,' apologised Wung. 'It was the mud. I could not walk as quickly as I expected, and with the mist it was not easy to keep a straight line.'

'Otherwise you're all right?' prompted Ginger.

'Perfectly well.'

'No trouble?'

'None at all.'

'Great work,' congratulated Ginger. 'Come on, let's get home. No doubt you could do with a square meal.'

'What I need more than anything is hot water to remove this disgusting mud,' said Wung.

They made their way across the beach to where Bertie was sitting, hunched up, by the dinghy.

'Come on, you blokes, it's getting chilly,' he complained. 'How's the boy Wung?'

'Very dirty,' replied the Chinaman.

'That's what comes of getting mixed up with a bunch of scallywags,' said Bertie cheerfully. 'Get aboard. Any more for the jolly old Skylark?'

They took their places and, with paddles busy, soon picked up the aircraft where she rode at anchor on a gentle swell. The dinghy was deflated and hauled aboard. The engines growled, and the big machine taxied out towards the open sea. Not until the long low coastline had disappeared from sight did Biggles open up. Then the Scorpion tilted its nose towards the starry sky and swung round on a south-westerly course for its base.

CHAPTER xi'

Wung Reports

six hours later, with the machine snug at her mooring, everyone foregathered in the cabin to hear what Wung had to say. Bathed, rested

WUNG REPORTS



*'He could not think it was me, a dirty Chinese labourer,
speaking in English.'*

and breakfasted, he was back in his own clothes, and had obviously suffered no ill effects from his exploit.

'Now, tell us all about it,' invited Biggles, arranging the photographs on the table so that they could be used to demonstrate the report.

'First of all,' began Wung, 'I can tell you that Ross is there.' 'How do you know that?'

asked Biggles sharply.

'I've spoken to him.'

'You've spoken to him?'

'Yes.'

'How did you recognise him?'

'I was working in the compound when I heard a man call another by the name Ross. I worked my way over to him and, without looking, told him to be ready because friends were near. You should have seen his face!' Wung smiled at the recollection. 'He could not think it was me, a dirty Chinese labourer, speaking in English, and he stared about him as if the voice had come from the air. He needed a tonic, poor fellow, for he looked so lonely and depressed.'

'He didn't speak to you?'

'No. I walked on.'

'What do you mean by the compound?'

'Within the barbed wire fence that surrounds the prisoners' quarters.'

'How did you come to be there?'

'I was working — emptying the garbage cans, and that sort of thing. I have been working all the time. I can't say that I liked it, but it served my purpose well.'

'How did this come about?'

'I made my way to the camp shortly after daylight. Without any attempt at concealment, I approached with confidence, knowing that no one would suspect me of being anything but what I appeared to be. There were many others exactly like me moving about, miserable, poverty-stricken inhabitants of the village — one can hardly call the collection of hovels a town. The wretched people were being mustered into gangs for labour.

There must have been nearly two hundred of them. A nasty-looking man, a North Korean I think, told me to get in my place, so I joined the nearest gang. No one took the slightest notice of me. We were given a miserable ration of rice to keep us alive and then we went to work.'

'What sort of work are all these people doing?'

'They're doing many things. It is quite certain that the place is being enlarged, although for what purpose I could not find out. For one thing, a single track railway is being built.

It is almost complete. From the direction it takes I would think it joins the main Trans-Siberian line farther north. An airfield is also under construction. There is already a landing-field of sorts. It is being improved. All transport comes by air, as one would expect, for there is no road worthy of the name. There is a temporary shelter for an aeroplane. An aeroplane is in it now, but I could not say what sort.

There is also a petrol store. The first train, which came in while I was there, brought in a load of petrol, also some fuel oil for the engine that makes the electricity. There is also some ammunition, which is stored in the open under tarpaulins.'

'Did you learn what this was for?'

'No. Every gang worked under a foreman, and I joined a different gang each day in order to cover as much ground as possible. That is how I got into the compound. One of the duties was scrubbing the huts and taking away the rubbish. I am not quite certain how many men live in the compound because they come and go all the time. At present there are not more than twelve. I could judge their nationality by the language they spoke. I made out five British, four Americans, two Frenchmen and one other. At one time there were more than this, but some have moved on. I will tell you where, and why, presently.

First I must deal with the compound as it is of most importance to you.'

Wung pulled a photograph towards him and put a finger on the spot.

'This is it,' he continued. 'First of all, you must understand, there is a barbed wire fence round the whole camp. It is of five strands and does not offer a serious obstacle. It is simply to keep the natives from wandering into the place, I imagine. Within this outer fence there is another, smaller one, also of barbed wire. It is higher and has eight strands.

Inside are the prisoners' quarters consisting of three wooden buildings, two large and one small. One is a dining and recreation room; another is the sleeping accommodation; the third one is a wash-house. They are all built of wooden planks.'

'Tell us about the sleeping quarters,' requested Biggles. 'We shall make our raid at night, of course, so that is where we shall find the prisoners.'

'It is one large room with trestle beds round the wall,' explained Wung.

'The end is partitioned off to make a small cubicle for the man in charge. At present this is occupied by an extremely unpleasant fellow who, I am sorry to say, is an Englishman. At least, he speaks English.

The prisoners call him sergeant. He is a bad man, ugly of face and ugly of temper. It seemed to me that he took delight in making the lives of the prisoners unbearable, shouting at them with much beastly language. This man, by the way, keeps the key of the hut, although the door is seldom locked. It hangs on a nail in his room. Work stops at sundown, when the prisoners, after a meal, retire to the sleeping hut.

There is only one way in and out of the compound. It is a gate, with a sentry box. A Chinese soldier is always on duty there. He is changed every four hours.'

'Did you get the actual times?' asked Biggles.

'Yes. A new guard comes on at midnight. The next one comes at four a.m.

There are about fifty Chinese soldiers altogether. There is a Russian officer, but what he does I do not know.'

'From what you tell me, the place doesn't seem very well guarded,' observed Biggles.

'Nor is it. I got the impression, from the casual way things are done, that the last thing the people in the camp expect is trouble. It would be a fairly easy matter for the prisoners to get out of their compound. They would merely need a tool to cut the wire. But even if they did this they would not get far. Where could they go? The land around is absolutely flat, and is either boggy or paddy fields. These stretch for miles, and are more efficacious than iron bars. From the camp one can see for miles.

If a man tried to run away in daylight he would certainly be seen from the camp. If he tried to travel in the dark he would flounder about in the bogs and perhaps lose his life in one of them. He might also wander about in circles, for there is usually a mist at night. And as I have said, at the finish, where would he go?'

'What do the soldiers do?' asked Biggles.

'They kick a football about, mostly. They take turns at guard duty, but it is all very haphazard. Apart from the people I have mentioned there is a fairly large population of men whom I took to be mechanics and engineers in charge of the wireless rooms and the power station. They live by themselves.' Wung referred again to the photograph. 'This is the power station, here. Among other things it provides the camp with electric light. I need say nothing about the village of Kratsen. As you can see, it is some little way away from the camp. Presently I will mark on this photograph the purpose of every building shown on it, so that it can be studied by everyone at leisure.

After three days in the place I could find my way about even on a dark night.'

'What is this building over here, standing by itself?' inquired Biggles, pointing.

'That is the bungalow of the overall commander of the station. I saw him only once, at a distance. I believe he is a Russian. At any rate, he is known as Commandant Kubenoff. It is said that he is usually the worse for drink.'

'I suppose the camp is on the telephone?'

'Yes.'

'You were going to say something about the prisoners who have been to the camp but are no longer there?' prompted Biggles.

'Oh yes. The talk is, these are the men who are trusted by the Communists. They are taken to Korea where, in captured uniforms of the United Nations, they are infiltrated through the lines to act as spies and saboteurs. A North Korean boasted to me of this.

The headquarters of these renegades happens to be in his own village, a place on the coast called Fashtun, near the Russian frontier.'

'We'll bear that name in mind,' said Biggles grimly. 'Anything else, Wung?'

'That is all I can think of for the moment. No doubt other minor points will occur to me from time to time. I can tell you the names of most of the men in the camp should you require them. I often heard them being called.

Every little while one is taken to the broadcasting room, where, I understand, he is made to read from a paper. There is much secret grumbling about this; but to refuse means death.'

Was one of the names that you heard Macdonald?' asked Biggles.

Wung thought for a moment. 'No. I don't remember hearing that name.'

'Never mind,' said Biggles. 'You've done a great show, Wung. With the information you have provided, the job of cleaning up the place shouldn't be difficult. Personally, I see no reason why we shouldn't get on with it right away. The governing factor is the weather.

At the moment it's fair. Should it change, we might have to hang about for weeks, and in that time alterations in the camp might throw our plan out of gear. I propose, therefore, that we should crack in tonight, and get the business over. Has anyone an objection?'

Only Wung answered. 'I think you're right,' he said. 'I have no definite information, but when I left there was an atmosphere of expectation about the place, as if some change was contemplated.'

'Very well,' resumed Biggles. 'Let's get the thing into line. We have two tasks. The first, is the rescue of Ross, and any other British or foreign troops who have had enough of Communism. If they all decide to come we may find ourselves overloaded — but we'll deal with that if and when it arises. The second part of the operation is the silencing of the propaganda factory. By dividing our force into two parts I see no reason why both jobs shouldn't be worked together. One part can work the rescue, and the other, the demolitions. As we have brought

all the equipment likely to be required, and plenty of hands, that resolves itself into a matter

of timing. I will lead the rescue party. Captain King will be in charge of the demolition squad. Has anybody anything to say about that?'

'It seems the obvious way to go about it,' observed Gimlet.

'Then we'll work out a time-table on those lines,' asserted Biggles.

'There is one other point that had better be settled here and now. The total force available will comprise eight bodies,¹ but not all of them will be able to go to the objective. One of my party will have to stay with the aircraft. Someone else will have to stand by the dinghy to deal with possible interference. That means that six men will be available for the actual raid.'

'But am I not allowed to come?' put in Wung, in a disappointed voice.

'You've already done your part,' Biggles told him. 'Do you want to come?'

'Of course.'

'Fair enough,' agreed Biggles. 'That suits me. Knowing the ground so well you'll be useful as a guide. Algy, as second-in-command, I shall have to ask you to remain in charge of the machine.'

'This being second-in-command does me out of all the fun that's going,'

protested Algy.

'I'm aware of it,' admitted Biggles. 'But in a military operation either the first or second in command should remain in reserve in case things come unstuck. Ross is a personal affair of mine so I intend to go to him.'

'That means you'll be in charge during my absence.'

'Okay,' agreed Algy.

'A member of the demolition party will have to remain with the dinghy or I may find myself short-handed,' went on Biggles. 'That means that seven will go forward. That won't be too many, either, because there will be a fair amount of stuff to carry. Wung, knowing his way about, will act as liaison between both parties. I shall try to time our arrival on the coast for midnight. Allowing an hour and a half for the march we ought to be at the objective by one-thirty. An hour should be enough for the job. That means we ought to be back at the aircraft by four. But I'll work out the time-table with Gimlet. He knows how long it will take him to fix his fireworks.'

Now let's have something to eat. After that we'll see about getting ready.'

CHAPTER XIII

The Raid

It was shortly after midnight, in the soft moonlight, when the Scorpion, after a long glide, brushed its keel gently on the sullen waters of the Yellow Sea within a short distance of the flat Manchurian coast. The anchor found bottom at six fathoms, and the aircraft swung gently to a flowing tide. Not a light showed anywhere, near or far, on land or sea.

Without fuss or bustle the dinghy was launched, and Gimlet's party, with its rather heavy equipment, moved off. In twenty minutes the squat little craft was back to take the remainder of the force ashore. Algy remained in the cockpit with a Thermos flask of tea for company.

All was quiet on the beach. A quick reconnaissance was made from the top of the dunes, but nothing was seen, so loads were distributed, and with Wung leading, a prismatic compass in his hand, the party went forward in single file. It was Cub who, to his disappointment, had been allotted the task of mounting guard over the dinghy, for the reason that his older comrades were better able to carry the batteries, coils of wire, explosive charges, and other equipment. He remained at his post, a rifle across his knees.

The march that followed was a matter of wearisome necessity. It was heavy going all the way, as from Wung's experience they all knew it would be. The ground was sheer marsh. There was no actual standing water, but the earth was soft and treacherous under a blanket of spongy sphagnum moss. The only things to thrive in it were a coarse grass, which grew in awkward tussocks, and short rushes, apparently some sort of iris from the flowers it bore. The air was dank and chill. What it would be like when the icy hand of winter settled on it Ginger could only imagine. The prisoners, he pondered as they trudged on, would need their fur caps and heavy coats. They would also regret their folly when they found that this insalubrious area of the earth's surface was to be their home.

Over the vast plain hung a mist of varying intensity. For the most part

visibility was limited to about a hundred yards. Beyond that everything was dim and vague. If it made the going uncomfortable, as it did, it made amends by screening their approach. At intervals long skeins of migrating geese could be heard passing overhead.

Two rests were taken before Wung announced that the immediate objective was not far ahead. This was the ruins of a peasant's hovel, built of turves, now crumbling. It stood about a hundred yards from the outer wire. Wung had come upon it, and used it, on his first sortie. He had drawn attention to it on one of the photographs as a useful place to make a dump from which to operate. The suggestion had been accepted.

The dilapidated dwelling loomed up, a mere blob rising a few feet above the level ground in a featureless landscape. Some way beyond it two lights grew slowly in the mist. One of them, Wung stated, came from the commandant's bungalow; the other from the radio station, which operated day and night. There was no sign of movement anywhere so loads were dropped while a general survey was made, Wung indicating the positions of the most important buildings. In the direction of the little township that gave the place its name all was dark and silent. It might not have been there for all that could be seen of it.

After a short rest Gimlet said he would be moving on. In working out the details of the scheme it had been decided that, as he had the most work to do, he should have twenty minutes clear start. Both parties were to rally on the ruined hovel in the event of trouble, or, if all went well, on the completion of their respective tasks. The explosive charges would then be fired, to be followed at once by the retreat to the coast.

Copper and Trapper were already on their knees arranging the batteries.

This done, they moved off with their leader under Wung's guidance, uncoiling wire from a drum as they went. In a few minutes they had disappeared in the darkness.

Biggles, Bertie and Ginger squatted on mud bricks that had fallen from

the walls until the twenty minutes grace had expired. Then Biggles rose to his feet. 'Time's up,' he said softly, and walked on towards the outer fence of the camp. It could not yet be seen, but its position was known.

There had been some discussion before the start as to how to make the best of Wung's local knowledge. At the end it had been decided that he should go with Gimlet, who had several objectives beside the radio station and its pylons. It was intended, if possible, to deal also with the power house and the petrol and ammunition dumps. Trapper, too, was to cut the telephone wires. Thus it was hoped that by destroying all communications nothing would be known of the raid, outside the station, for some time — long enough, at all events, for the Scorpion to reach its base without fear of interception by enemy aircraft.

Biggles had only one objective, which was to reach the prisoners' sleeping quarters, and this, compared with what Gimlet had to do, appeared to be a fairly simple matter. There was only one snag.

There was no cover of any sort. On the other hand, with one man only on duty at the gate

— and he, in all probability, not very vigilant — there was reason to hope that the objective might be gained without a sound being made.

It was agreed that the sentry would have to be put out of action, for even one man in the rear, armed with a rifle, might do a lot of mischief.

Copper, the big Cockney ex-policeman, had offered to attend to this matter.

Biggles' party made contact with the fence some distance from the sentry box that marked the position of the gate. They all stared at it. There was no sign of the sentry, so it could be presumed that Copper had done his work. However, to be on the safe side, Biggles decided to confirm this. He sent Ginger along.

Gun in hand, Ginger made a cautious approach, advancing on the

sentry box from the rear. The man was there, unconscious, trussed up in a heap on the floor. Ginger returned to the others and reported this, whereupon Biggles, with powerful cutters brought for the purpose, in a couple of minutes had made a broad gap through the wire. The purpose of this, instead of using the gate, was to provide them with their own line of retreat in case of emergency.

With eyes and ears alert the party moved forward quietly to the inner fence — the wire that surrounded the prisoners' quarters. It was reached in a silence that was profound.

Again came the crisp snick as Biggles' cutters bit through the wire. The loose ends were dragged aside and the way lay open to the final objective. The two big huts were already in plain view, silhouetted against the sky. The nearer, thanks to Wung, was known to be the sleeping quarters. To the door, which was at the end, Biggles now made his way.

It is not to be supposed that the apparent ease of these operations bereft them of any atmosphere of excitement. Far from it. Darkness is always a threat; and the very silence hung over the place like a menace. The knowledge that at any moment a shout or a shot might shatter it imposed a degree of suspense that kept all nerves at full stretch. Hearts and pulses, however, toughened by experience, increase their tempo at such times.

Ginger's eyes, striving to probe the surrounding gloom, were never still.

They became fixed on a movement. Psst!' he warned.

In a moment they were all flat on the ground, worming round the nearest corner of the hut.

'What is it?' breathed Biggles.

'Someone coming.'

They lay motionless, waiting, listening, as approaching footsteps swished through the rank grass.

Ginger allowed his breath to escape in a sigh of relief. 'It's Wung,' he announced. '

Something must have gone wrong.'

They all stood up and Wung joined the party.

'What's the matter?' asked Biggles in a terse undertone.

'There seems to be a conference going on at the Commandant's house,' reported Wung in a low voice. 'Captain King asked me to look in when we were passing, Some men are talking about you. I heard your name mentioned. Captain King could not wait as he has much to do, but he thought you should know in case some sort of trap has been set.'

'You actually looked in the room?'

'Yes, through the window.'

'Who is there?'

'The Commandant. With him is a Chinese general whom they call Kwang-Sen.

I have not seen him before, but he seems to be senior to the Commandant.

There is also another Russian officer, who is, I think, an aeroplane pilot. He wears wings on his uniform. There is also a German. I think he does not speak much Russian or Chinese, because there is an interpreter.'

'Did you see this German when you were here before?' 'No.'

'What sort of man is he?'

'Tall, clean shaven, well dressed. He stands and speaks like a soldier.

He wears an eyeglass, and smokes all the time a cigarette in a long holder.'

'Sounds as if von Stalhein has got here,' remarked Biggles dryly, looking at the others. 'I can't say that I'm altogether surprised. After all, this is his affair as much as ours.' He turned back to Wung. 'Did you get any idea of what these men were talking about, apart from mentioning my name?'

'From what I could make out the German was trying to convince General Kwang-Sen that you would come here, so there should be more soldiers. He seems to know that you have left London, and that British Intelligence now knows about the broadcasting station.

,

'What did the General say to that?'

'He seemed disinclined to do anything. I have the impression that he was drinking with Commandant Kubenoff when the others arrived.'

'Nothing else?'

'No. I did not stay long because Captain King was waiting for me.'

'All right. You'd better get back to him. Tell him to lose no time because von Stalhein is here, and if he has his way things are likely to happen.'

Wung went off and soon merged into the gloom.

Biggles faced the others. 'I'd better have a look at this in case it is decided to post extra guards right away. That might put Gimlet in a jam.

Stand fast till I come back. If a flap should start, try to grab Ross and make for the ruined hut. I'll join you there.' So saying, he walked quickly in the direction of the bungalow, the position of which was clear from the light that streamed from one of its windows.

A glance showed him that his surmise had been correct. Von Stalhein, as coldly austere and as immaculate as ever in spite of his long journey, was expostulating with a heavily-built Chinaman who, in a uniform decorated with medals, sprawled in an armchair with a glass in his hand.

A man in Russian uniform — Kubenoff, Biggles presumed — was sitting opposite. Standing nearby was a man who, from his actions and the way he spoke, was evidently the interpreter. Von Stalhein spoke in German.

The matter is of importance to me, if not to you, General,' he was saying. 'Why do you think I have come all this way? For my own good, I admit, but for yours also. This man Ross is a spy, put in by the British secret agent, Bigglesworth. If it is learned in Moscow that a stool-pigeon has been introduced into the organisation it will be bad for me, and for you, too, if you do nothing about it. Stresser, one of my men in Europe, has made a complete confession. He was suspected, and has been made to talk. He now admits that in Prague he sold to Bigglesworth information about the destination of Ross, who was followed out from England.'

'We will have this man Ross before us in the morning,' said the General thickly. 'He shall tell us all he knows.'

'Why not now?' argued von Stalhein.

'Because I am tired. Nothing is likely to happen between now and daylight.'

Biggles, with his eyes on von Stalhein's face, could almost sympathise with him. It seemed to be the fate of the German that his own efficiency should be offset by the laxity of the people under whom he served.

Another man stepped into the conversation. 'It would be better to wait for a little while,'

he said. 'Ross is to broadcast presently. It is important and will be relayed to all stations.'

He does not know this, of course. He has been told that it is only a rehearsal to test his voice, otherwise he would refuse. He is difficult.

It would be better not to upset him just before the broadcast.'

'I agree,' said the General, reaching for a bottle that stood on a nearby table.

'But, at least, it would be no trouble to put on extra guards,' protested von Stalhein.

Kwang-Sen yawned. 'Very well, if it will satisfy you.'

'Why not let me have a word with Ross?' suggested von Stalhein. 'He knows me. I would tell him that his being sent here was all a mistake and that I have come to take him back to Europe. That would put him in good heart.'

I would learn the truth from him.

Afterwards, you can do what you like with him.'

'That might be a good thing,' conceded Kwang-Sen. 'But don't worry me again tonight. I'

m tired and I'm going to bed. Have a drink?'

Biggles waited for no more. He hastened back to the others. 'We were just in time,' he informed them grimly. 'We'd better get mobile. Von Stalhein is here. Stresser has spilt the whole can of beans, so von Stalhein has a pretty good idea of what's likely to happen.'

He insists on the guards being doubled. The General is soaked with liquor, and can't be bothered, but he has more or less agreed. What is worse, von Stalhein is trying to get to Ross. I left them all talking.

But, whatever the others do, von Stalhein won't go to bed.

We don't want him barging into the picture before we are finished, so we'd better get Ross and pull out right away.'

'What's the drill?' asked Ginger.

'I shall have to switch on the light in the hut,' answered Biggles. 'We must see what we're doing. When I do, you, Bertie, will slip along to the far end and deal with this sergeant fellow if he tries to make trouble, as no doubt he will. But no shooting unless the position becomes desperate. Okay. Let's go.'

Automatic in one hand, Biggles advanced to the door. At the same moment it was opened from the inside and a man in pyjamas stepped out. Half-asleep, it seemed, he had taken two paces towards the wash-house before he noticed that he was not alone. The shock brought him to life.

'What's the idea? Who are you?' he demanded, in English, with an American accent.

Biggles showed his gun. 'Are you an American?'

'Sure I'm an American.'

'Do you like it here or would you rather go home?'

The man stared. 'Would I rather go home?' he echoed incredulously.

'That's somewhere I didn't reckon to see again. Serve me right for being a sucker. Who are you?'

'British agents. We've come to fetch one of our fellows home. The name's Ross.'

'That's right. The guy's inside.'

'Are you coming with us?'

'Am I coming? Brother, wait till I get my clothes on!'

'Stand fast for a minute.'

Biggles went to the door. Inside all was in darkness. From it came the heavy breathing of sleeping men. A few seconds sufficed to find the electric light switch. It clicked, and the scene inside the hut was revealed.

It was as Wung had described. Low trestle beds, about twelve on each side, were arranged round the walls. Not all were occupied. From those that were, men, awakened by the light, raised themselves on an elbow to ascertain the reason.

Bertie walked quickly down the centre gangway to a door at the far end and took up a position beside it.

From behind it a harsh voice shouted: 'Put that light out!' 'Put it out yourself,' invited Bertie smoothly.

A stream of threats well mixed with curses was the reply. An instant later the door was flung open and a man with tousled hair, and pyjamas awry, appeared, eyes glowering belligerently.

'That'll do nicely,' said Bertie. 'Don't move.'

The man spun round and blinked at the muzzle of Bertie's gun. By this time the occupied beds were astir. Some of the men sat up. Others flung off their blankets and sprang to their feet. 'Take it easy, everybody,'

ordered Biggles. 'Ross!'

'Sir?'

'Get your clothes on and make it snappy. We've come for you.' Biggles went on: 'Listen, everybody. Anyone who wants to go home will stand up.

Those who want to stay, lie down — and stay down. No tricks. This gun's loaded.'

The sergeant in charge found his voice. He took a pace forward, but, seeing Bertie's gun move, stopped abruptly. 'What is this?' he demanded.

'Just a hold-up — just a hold-up,' murmured Bertie. 'Nothing to get excited about. Stand still unless you want to go bye-byes for a long time.'

The man stood still, staring. There was in fact little else he could do in a situation that he could hardly have imagined.

Biggles' voice rose again above the babble of conversation that had broken out. 'Not so much noise,' he snapped. 'One word of warning. Those who come with me will face a court-martial when they get home. Please yourselves. I don't care whether you come or stay.'

Practically all the men who were scrambling into their clothes continued to do so. Only two got back into their beds, and later on Biggles was to learn why. They, and the sergeant in charge, were wanted in their own countries for crimes more serious than desertion.

The sergeant had, in fact, murdered a girl in Berlin while serving with the Forces of Occupation.

The first man to be ready was, from his accent, an American. His bed was at the far end of the room. Still buttoning his tunic, he advanced purposefully towards Bertie. 'Thanks for calling, pal,' he said in a curious voice. 'I was afraid I was in this dump for keeps.'

Show us your gun.'

Smiling, Bertie half withdrew; but with a lightning movement the man snatched the gun from his hand and jumped back.

'Nice work,' said the sergeant, and started to move; but he stopped dead as the muzzle of the weapon jerked round to cover him. 'What – what's the idea?' he faltered.

The American's eyes had taken on a queer glitter. His lips were parted and drawn back against his teeth. 'You know the idea, Sarge,' he grated.

'Remember me? Clutson's the name – Joe Clutson, from Arizona. You prodded me into this frame-up, didn't you, me and my buddy, Johnny Briggs? You remember Johnny? You croaked him, didn't you?

Bashed him on the head with a hammer because he told you what you are – a dirty, lying, sneaking rat. I've prayed every night for this chance. Now I know that prayers are answered.'

'Stop that!' shouted Biggles from the far end of the room.

'Now, wait a minute, Joe,' quavered the sergeant, raising his hand.

'Wait nothing,' snarled Clutson. 'Now it's my turn, even if I fry for it.'

Hold this, you swine, for Johnny. You—'

The rest was lost in the crash of the weapon as it spat a stream of sparks that ended at the sergeant's chest.

The sergeant, a look of horror and amazement frozen on his face, staggered back against the wall. His body sagged and he slumped slowly to the floor.

In the shocked silence that followed Clutson handed the weapon back to Bertie. 'Thanks, pal,' he said simply.

CHAPTER XIV

Von Stalhein is Annoyed

The silence was next broken by Biggles from the far end of the room. 'You fool!' he rasped, clipping his words in his anger. 'You crazy fool!

You've probably sunk us all.'

'I've sunk the rat who killed my buddy, and that's all I care,' answered Clutson, speaking carelessly, like a man who is content and has no regrets. He lit a cigarette.

In a way, Ginger could sympathise with him; but he was aghast at the price everyone was likely to pay for his revenge.

'Get the key of the hut, Bertie,' ordered Biggles. 'According to Wung it hangs in the cubicle. Tell me when you've got it.'

Bertie darted in. 'Okay!' he called.

Biggles switched off the light, in the hope, presumably of delaying the inevitable investigation. The report must have been heard all over the camp, but that did not necessarily mean that it would be traced to the compound immediately. If the light was on, however, it would speak as plainly as words — certainly to the keen-witted von Stalhein.

'Outside, everybody,' ordered Biggles. 'Come on, Ross. Any others who want to come will have to finish dressing on the way. This will be a hot spot inside five minutes. Give me the key, Bertie. Thanks. Now get these fellows through the wire and along to the hut. Ginger, you can go with them and take care of Ross if there's trouble.'

'What about you?'

'I shall try to cause a diversion. With everyone on the move, Gimlet is liable to be cut off'

Bertie mustered his flock. 'This way, chaps,' he ordered. 'No more talking.' He set off at the double, followed by a crocodile of men hugging various garments and other possessions.

Biggles watched them out of sight and then, turning his attention to the camp, saw that the shot had done what he feared. The place was astir.

Lights sprang up in several places and hurrying figures could be seen against them. Very soon three of these stood out clearly as they ran towards the compound. One of them, he saw without surprise, was von Stalhein.

Still holding his gun, Biggles took a pace round the corner and, pressing his body against the woodwork, stood still. He could no longer see the figures, but he could hear them coming. They ran up, panting, and, as he was sure they would, went straight into the hut.

The light clicked on. For a moment all was quiet as the men took in the scene. Then the prone figure of the sergeant must have been noticed, for the footsteps hurried on to the far end. The next move, Biggles knew, would be a general alarm.

He walked round to the door and looked in. He saw what he expected to see. The three men were staring down at the prostrate sergeant, while the two prisoners who had stayed behind were telling them, incoherently, what had happened.

Biggles reached out to close the door and lock it, intending to depart then without revealing himself; but the movement must have caught von Stalhein's eye, for he looked round sharply and, of course, saw who was at the door. Biggles finished what he was doing, and hearing swift footsteps within, and guessing what they portended, stepped aside smartly as soon as the door was locked.

'Bigglesworth!' came von Stalhein's voice.

'Good morning to you,' answered Biggles.

A heavy revolver crashed, and splinters of wood flew from the door in line with where von Stalhein must have supposed Biggles to be standing.

'Naughty!' chided Biggles.

'I'll remember this,' promised von Stalhein, an edge on his voice.

'If your boss tries to give you a black, tell him it was his own fault for putting the camp in charge of a drunk,' said Biggles. 'I'll confirm it. You know my address? You'll find a souvenir on the door.'

He took off the spotted tie he was still wearing, hung it over the door handle, and walked away in the direction of the gap in the wire.

By the time he had reached it von Stalhein and his companions must have discovered that they were locked in, for there was a good deal of banging on the door. There was also some shouting. This was followed by several revolver shots, as someone, Biggles thought, tried to shoot the lock out of the door. He walked on. That the shots in the hut had been heard was soon apparent from the way more figures began to converge on it.

He paid little attention to them, and went on to the hovel without meeting anyone. Bertie and his party were there, a huddled, silent group; but Gimlet had not yet arrived.

Biggles waited, staring in the direction from which they should come.

Wung, alone, was the first to arrive. He reported that the others were on their way. There had been some delay, he explained, because so many people were now moving about.

'Good enough,' acknowledged Biggles, 'As you know the way you can

start off and get this gang to the coast. Bertie and Ginger will wait here with me in case Gimlet runs into trouble and needs help.'

Telling the men to follow him Wung set off across the marsh.

A few minutes later Gimlet and his two assistants arrived. 'Everything all right?' asked Biggles.

'Yes,' answered Gimlet. 'I was afraid at one time we might have to cut the programme short, but we managed to complete it. Did you get your man?'

'He's on his way to the boat, with some others.'

'What was the shooting about? That sort of started things.' 'Couldn't help it. A crazy prisoner shot the sergeant. Said he had bumped off his pal, or something.'

'Fool thing to do.'

'People do fool things when they lose their heads.'

'Shan't keep you a minute,' said Gimlet, and turned to watch critically while Copper and Trapper, with the aid of a small, shielded torch, made the connections to their batteries.

Bertie spoke. 'By the way, Gimlet old boy, I've been meaning to ask you for some time, have you still got that flea-bitten old grey mare you called Seagull?'

'Of course I've got her.'

'She could jump like a cat, that mare.'

'She still can.'

'Want to sell her?'

'Not likely. I'm hoping to win next year's Grand National with her.'

'Riding her yourself?'

'Of course.'

'She might do it. She's got brains, that old lady. I remember, out huntin', how she watched for the rabbit holes.'

'Here they go,' came Copper's voice from the ground. 'What did I tell yer, Trapper old chum? Didn't I tell yer we should be fox huntin'

ternight if these two got tergether?'

Trapper clicked his tongue. 'You said it.'

Not so much talking, you two,' requested Gimlet. 'Watch what you're doing.'

'We're all set, sir,' informed Copper, straightening his back. 'Good. All right. You can pull the plug.'

Copper took the sparking plunger in both hands and thrust it home.

Ginger was prepared for a certain amount of noise, but not for what actually happened.

He nearly went over backwards as the earth erupted in a dozen places at once. Spears of flame leapt skyward, taking with them objects that could not be identified. Into the reverberations of the explosions came the crash of falling pylons, which gave a wonderful display of blue sparks as the electrical connections snapped and shorted.

Small arms ammunition continued to crackle in spasmodic bursts from

the direction of the ammunition dump. Black smoke began to roll up above a lurid glow.

'Jolly good show, old boy,' murmured Bertie.

'Looks as if we got the fuel tanks after all,' observed Gimlet thoughtfully. He turned to Biggles. 'I wasn't quite sure about them because, having got your message, I had to finish in a bit of a hurry.'

'If I'm any judge of this sort of thing you've made a pretty job of it,' complimented Biggles.

'Bent the old microphone somewhat, I'll bet,' said Bertie cheerfully.

'Yes. I don't think there will be any Music While You Work from this station for a day or two,' agreed Gimlet.

'In that case we might as well be getting back,' suggested Biggles. 'I don't think we've much to worry about. Everyone seems to be busy trying to put the fires out. From what I can see from here the place is in too much of a flap for anyone to organise anything.'

'Poor old Erich,' said Bertie sadly. 'He'll get a kick in the pants from the boys who thought out this jolly little scheme. Serves him right. Yes, by Jove! absolutely.'

'It's his own fault,' asserted Biggles. 'He will play with the wrong sort of people. Still, I hope nothing serious happens to him. We should miss him. He keeps us on our toes. But let's get mobile.'

They set off, and making good time, overtook Wung and his party just before they reached the coast. There was no pursuit; or if there was, no sign of it was seen. Which was just as well, because the dinghy had to make several trips between the shore and the aircraft to get everyone aboard. However, it was only a matter of time. When the last journey had been completed the dinghy was deflated, and abandoned to save weight, and the Scorpion, loaded to capacity, with

Algy at the stick, took off and set a course for its base.

Biggles found Ross and congratulated him on his splendid work. 'By the way,' he went on, looking round. 'Which of these lads is your friend, Macdonald?'

'He isn't here, sir,' answered Ross.

Biggles looked disappointed. 'Why not?'

'He was shot some days ago, trying to escape,' said Ross, in a tremulous voice. 'He blamed himself for getting me into the business.'

'I'm sorry,' consoled Biggles quietly. 'I'm afraid that's the sort of thing that happens only too often when fellows decide to take the bit in their teeth.'

Bertie was sitting next to Gimlet. 'You were telling me about old Seagull?' he prompted.

Copper breathed heavily and nudged Trapper in the ribs. 'Ere they go agin,' he said plaintively. 'This is where I snatch a spot of shut-eye.'

Strewth! Could I do with a nice plate o' fish and chips? My oath I could.

This stayin' up all night always did make me peckish.'

Ginger looked at Cub and smiled. 'That's not a bad idea,' he whispered.

'I'm a bit weary myself'

The engines droned on under stars that were beginning to pale with the approach of another day.

That really is the end of the story as far as it concerned Biggles and his comrades. The Scorpion reached its base without trouble of any sort, and after a day's rest Biggles took off on the return flight home. He

took Ross with him. The other repentant deserters were left behind, having been handed over to the proper military authority for disciplinary action.

Guardsman Ross, it may be said here, was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for the part he had played, much to the astonishment of his comrades in barracks who had supposed him to be absent without leave.

It turned out that Ross knew the names of some of the renegades who had volunteered to act as spies behind the lines in Korea. Army Intelligence Officers, with this information, soon picked them up. Their fate remained a matter for conjecture. Nothing more was heard of them.

The raid on the village of Fashtun, their headquarters, was made by a force of Marine Commandos with satisfactory results. Biggles knew no more about that than was published in the newspapers, except, of course, he knew why the raid was made. As he said to the others, when they returned to normal duties after a few days break, he had no further interest in Korea.

But he had an interest in a letter that arrived some time later. A slow smile spread over his face as he read it. 'You won't guess who this is from so I'll tell you,' he said. 'Smith, our friend in Prague. He's home, and wants us to have a meal with him.'

'Well, blow me down!' cried Bertie. 'How did he manage it?'

'He doesn't say,' answered Biggles. 'But it should be quite a story'

And it was. But this is not the place to tell it.

01 plain Page 1

Page 2

Page 3

Page 4

Page 5

Page 6

Page 7

Page 8

Page 9

Page 10

Page 11

Page 12

Page 13

Page 14

Page 15

Page 16

Page 17

Page 18

Page 19

Page 20

Page 21

Page 22

Page 23

Page 24

Page 25

Page 26

Page 27

Page 28

Page 29

Page 30

Page 31

Page 32

Page 33

Page 34

Page 35

Page 36

Page 37

Page 38

Page 39

Page 40

Page 41

Page 42

Page 43

Page 44

02 plain Page 1

Page 2

Page 3

Page 4

Page 5

Page 6

Page 7

Page 8

Page 9

Page 10

Page 11

Page 12

Page 13

Page 14

Page 15

Page 16

Page 17

Page 18

Page 19

Page 20

Page 21

Page 22

Page 23

Page 24

Page 25

Page 26

Page 27

Page 28

Page 29

Page 30

Page 31

Page 32

Page 33

Page 34

Page 35

Page 36

Page 37

Page 38

Page 39

Page 40

Page 41

Page 42

Page 43

Page 44

Page 45

Page 46

Page 47

03 plain Page 1

Page 2

Page 3

Page 4

Page 5

Page 6

Page 7

Page 8

Page 9

Page 10

Page 11

Page 12

Page 13

Page 14

Page 15

Page 16

Page 17

Page 18

Page 19

Page 20

Page 21

Page 22

Page 23

Page 24

Page 25

Page 26

Page 27

Page 28

Page 29

Page 30

Page 31

Page 32

Page 33

Page 34

Page 35

Page 36

Page 37

Page 38

Page 39

Page 40

Page 41

Page 42

Page 43

Page 44

Page 45

Page 46

Page 47

Page 48

Page 49

Page 50

Page 51

Page 52

Page 53

*Any space
Any time*



ACE TRUCKING CO.

ANOTHER SCAN BROUGHT TO YOU BY ACE GARP
(Isitanywonder)